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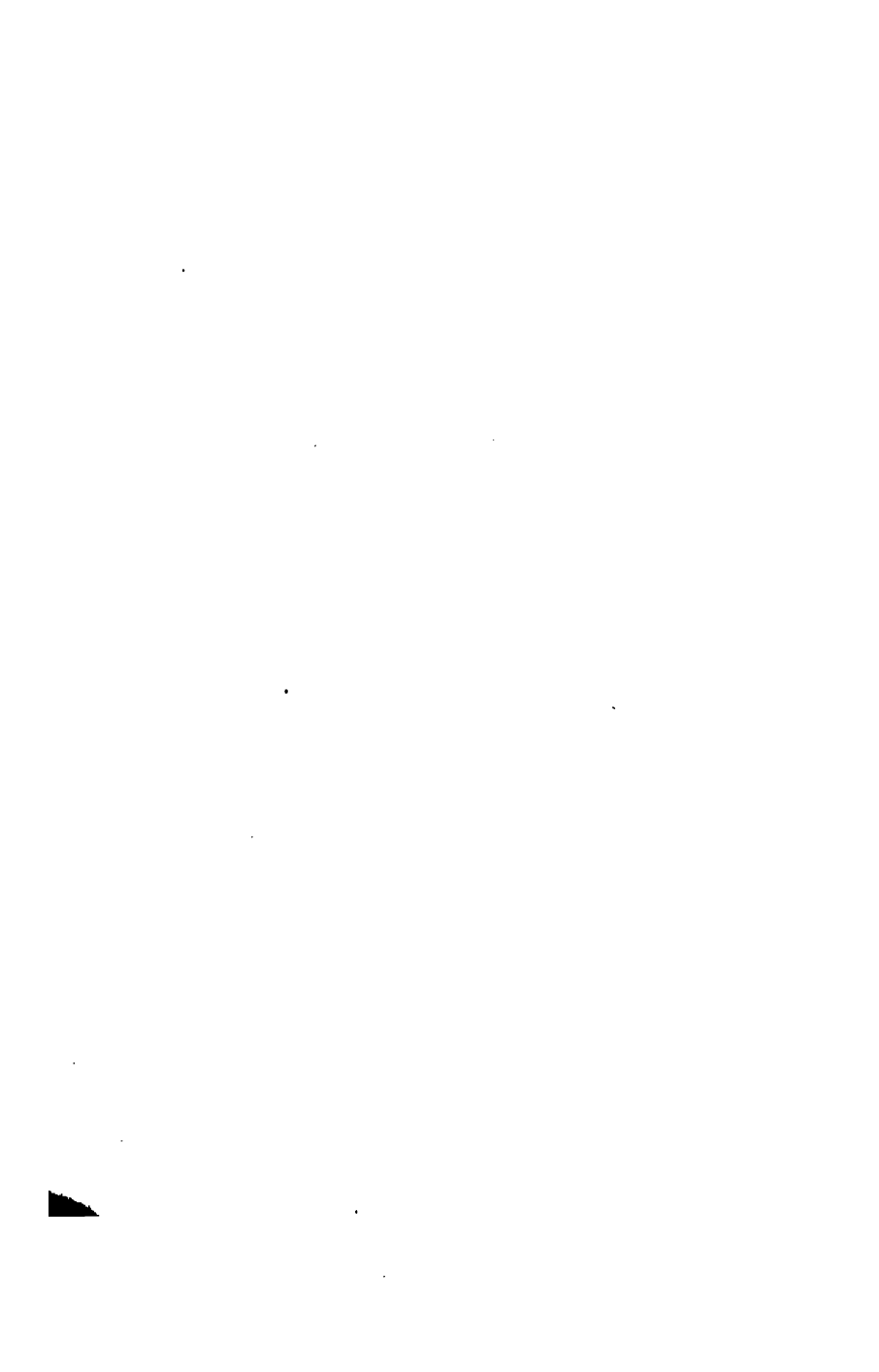
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A SAILOR'S HOME
AND OTHER STORIES

RICHARD DEHAN



A SAILOR'S HOME AND OTHER STORIES

By RICHARD DEHAN pseud.

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"A Gilded Vanity," "The Dop Doctor," etc.

l.c.

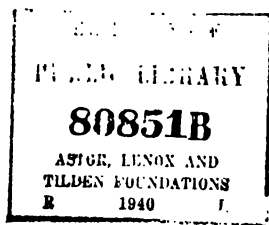


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A SAILOR'S HOME

I

GEORGE

A VICTIM OF HEREDITY

IT was the end of June, green, damp and steamy. And the meteorological conditions having favoured an outbreak of garden snails, Miss Pelleby, of Laurel Cottage, a dwelling long regarded as the stateliest in Rippleford village in its possession of a double front gate and a small but tortuous gravel drive, became painfully awake to the necessity of a general extermination of these gasteropods.

"Otherwise," she observed to her mild, middle-aged reflection in the looking-glass, as she tied her bonnet, "there will be no green peas."

"Nor broad beans!" shrieked Sarah, her one maid, whose dazzlingly clean kitchen was only separated by a row of whitewashed joists, a plank flooring, and a bedroom carpet from the sleeping-bower of Miss Pelleby above. "An' they've kidded so beautifully this year too."

"How often must I tell you, Sarah," returned Miss Pelleby rebukingly, "that I object to your use of that very vulgar term? Beans grow, develop, or sprout—they do not kid."

"Kid be George Comfort's word," said the defiant voice of the invisible handmaid. "And George do know more about beans—and peas, too—than any other man in Rippleford."

"Then I wish George had kept out of jail, that I do!" said Miss Pelleby to the Miss Pelleby in the glass; "for who I'm to get in his place before every green leaf is eaten up by those snails, I don't know."

"If ye do please, Miss Hetty," said the voice under Miss Pelleby's neat prunella walking shoes, "the baker's boy have just tell me he have a-heerd in the village as George be back again."

"That's impossible," retorted Miss Pelleby, "considering that only yesterday he was brought up before the magistrate at Readstone Petty Sessions for stealing fowls, sentenced to three weeks' imprisonment under the Summary Something-or-other Act, and is now lying chained and fettered in a felon's cell, which he might have known would be the case, poor fellow! when he went and stole old Mr. Dewey's four speckled Ham-burghs. I wish he had stolen mine, I'm sure! Knowing it to be the latter end of the week, and a case of inherited family failing, I should have made allowances! But as to his being back in Rippleford, that's all a story; and I only wish, for the sake of the garden, it was true."

"If ye do please, Miss Hetty," said the unseen but persistent handmaid, "I can see the top o' George's cottage from the end kitchen winder, and there's smoke coming out o' the chimney now."

The dwelling inhabited by the peccant George was scarcely to be dignified as a cottage. It stood in the middle of a small but well-kept fruit and vegetable garden, and was generally, during the less rheumatic months of the year, undergoing the process of being painted by a lady artist, whose umbrella, camp-stool, and easel, with its canvas or sketching-block, offered an invariable testi-

mony to the picturesqueness of the place. It is generally understood that to be picturesque is to be crumbly. George's dwelling was so picturesque that if the ivy which clothed its ancient walls and flourished on its uneven roof of mossy tiles had been stripped off it would certainly have subsided into a heap. It consisted of one apartment with a sleeping loft above, into which, since the flooring joists gave way some fourteen years previously, George had only ventured once—then being in liquor. Thus the shilling a week paid by the tenant for rent included all sorts of exciting possibilities, less valued by George than by the neighbours, who openly laid wagers, in gusty weather, upon the hour and moment of the inevitable collapse.

Contrary to the conviction of Miss Pelleby, the chimney smoke had borne true testimony to Sarah's experienced eye.

George was at home. He sat smilingly by the fire in the folding chair-bedstead in which he had slept for fourteen years. The Vicar's lady, who gave the chair, had never thought of explaining the simple mechanical process by which it could be converted into a bedstead, and George had never tried to find it out. Later on, when it was explained George declined to profit by his knowledge.

"Durin' the early part o' th' wick, I be tew tired to tackle th' dang'd machine," he had explained. "An' durin' th' latter part o' the wick I be tew drunk."

George smiled when he said this, as he smiled now sitting by the crackling wood fire of laths from the loft flooring, upon which a kettle boiled—not for tea. He was a sandy-grey, shrivelled-apple-faced man of fifty, invariably attired in heavy highlows, earth-stained mole-skin trousers, strapped at the knee, a patched checked shirt, prehistoric shooting-jacket of fitful check pattern, and an aged brown bowler shining with grease.

Smiling was a habit with George; and if it had not

been, the consciousness of being at large when, according to the sentence of two Justices of the Peace, he should have been languishing in a prison cell and pleasingly drunk instead of penitentially sober would have kept his features upon the stretch and lighted up a twinkle in his small blue eyes.

Somebody knocked at the door, a gentle tap. George got up to open it, firm in the belief that another lady artist had come to sketch the place. But the knocker was his weekly employer, Miss Pelleby.

"George Comfort!" the lady gasped when George appeared smiling in the doorway. "Can it possibly be you?"

"The same, I reckins, Miss 'Etty," said George, without aggressive certainty, rubbing his earth-stained hand over his chin, bristly with nearly four days' growth of beard.

"I was told it, but I couldn't believe it, and so I came round to find out for myself whether it was true," declared Miss Pelleby. "And now I see you I don't know how to credit my own eyes. Why it was only on Monday that the whole village saw you led away in custody by Pinching, the constable, for stealing Mr. Dewey's speckled Hamburgs. Cobber, Pinching's deputy, was carrying the murdered fowls in a sack; and when I saw the spectacle I blushed with shame to think what drink had brought you to."

"Did ye now, Miss 'Etty?" said George, with an interested air. "But I wasn't drunk o' Monday," he added simply, "it bein' th' upper end a' th' wick, when mother gits her way wi' me, ye knows."

"I thought of her when I saw you led away," continued Miss Pelleby, "and I said that if the good old hard-working soul had been alive to see you so disgraced she'd never have held up her honest head again."

"But feyther 'ud ha' winked his eye, feyther would,"

declared George. "Theer's a chip o' th' owd block, feyther 'd ha' said, 'by all the Laws o' Reddity.'"

Miss Pelleby stamped her prunella shoe upon the crazy floor.

"Heredity, heredity!" she repeated indignantly. "The silly excuse made nowadays by a pack of good-for-nothing people who hold that it's no use to strive against their own faults and vices, because their ancestors had them before them!"

"Miss 'Etty," asserted George doggedly, "I be a victim o' reddity. After I'd heerd that Temperance lecturer chap wi' the red nose talk on th' platform at Rippleford Recreation Rooms, I made no more manner of doubt about me. Ay, th' whole dismal history were as clear as pump water. 'Here you, George Comfort, stand,' says I to myself, 'only son and offsprout of a staid sober mother an' a do-nothin', poachin' rampallion of a feyther what were always i' liquor. Accordin' to the Laws o' Reddity—you be bound to take arter both your aunt's sisters——"

"Ancestors, I suppose you mean," said the indignant Miss Pelleby.

"I said aunt's sisters," asserted George. "Why, Miss 'Etty, I could fill a penny newspaper wi' the tale o' my endurings as an orphan lad betwixt twenty-five and thirty. What wi' mother faining to kip me from drinkin' away my wage at th' Red Cow, and feyther fetchin' of me in whenever I passed th' door, 'twas a case o' pull baker, pull devil. . . ."

"George!" screamed Miss Pelleby warningly. "George!"

"I said so before th' Justices on th' Bench at Readstone yesterday," asseverated the victim of hereditary tendencies. "Ay, I tow'd 'em how no sooner had I got me into th' tap wi' my pot of ale before me, but mother 'ud have me out agin wi' no more than the froth upo' my lips.

An' I tow'd 'em how I'd git me whoam an' sit me down to a basin o' tea or sich-like slops, an' how feyther 'ud come over me to such an extent as I'd furiously pitch th' stuff back o' chimbley. Then I goes on an' tells 'em how I hit on th' notion o' halvin' th' wick betwixt th' owd woman an' th' owd man, an' how ever sin' they've bided as peaceable as heart could wish."

"You don't mean that Squire Hardwick and Colonel Rogerson had the patience to listen to all that nonsense?" screamed Miss Pelleby.

"But I does," said George, passing his scandalised employer the one Windsor chair the cottage boasted. "Ay, an' they larfed fit to kill theirselves, wi' purple faces an' streamin' tears. An' Inspector Burridge he laughed, an' the Clerk o' the Court an' Constable Pinching, an' Deppity Cobber, an' th' Readstone police they laughed, an' the folks i' Court till th' Colonel he threatened to clear. An' they questions me how I divides th' wick betwixt mother and feyther. An' when I tells 'em as how I be a virtuous totaller from Sunday mornin' at Church time up to Wensday night, an' a 'bandoned drunkard from Wensday night up to Sunday mornin' at Church time, I thowt as they'd ha' burst. He, he, he!"

George smiled from ear to ear.

"And more shame for them!" asserted the scandalised Miss Pelleby.

"Then they gits askin' for evidence o' the theft, and Pinching tells his story as how he dropped in at my little place o' Saturday night an' finds me i' th' arm-chair before th' fire, as drunk as David's sow—he, he!" continued George. "An' Deppity Constable Cobber swears to everything Pinching says, as Pinching told him were his duty a-coming along th' road. Not that they set words i' my mouth, poor dogs! 'em were honest enough, seemin'ly. But having had my dram, and Saturday bein' feyther's end o' th' wick my tongue were nimble if my legs were

dead drunk, and some saucy things I mun' ha' said to 'em, sure enough—he, he, he!—judgin' by the way th' men hawhawed and th' women tittered. While as for Squire and Colonel, they nigh rolled off th' Bench."

"Shameful!" cried Miss Pelleby. "Shameful!"

"Seemin'ly," said George, in a tone of retrospect, "I'd hid them hins i' th' loft. This bein' Thriday an' feyther's half o' th' wick, I be a-glorying i' th' wickedness, though it scranmed me o' Sunday, Monday, Tewsday, an' Wensday, to reflect upon th' sin. Pinching said I were bowd as brass, tellin' him to go up an' look, which no bowsy fat man wi' a wife an' family durst dare, an' Deppity Cobber be nigh so bowsy as he. Seemin'ly they'd got their witses about 'em more than mid ha' bin bethought, for they hired a light boy . . . Ay, I'd gone off i' my drowse agin, when down he came! . . . Solon Stubberd, a pore child, wi' his two arms full o' lathwood an' plaster just where you can see the big new hole above—an' they speckilt Hambugs o' Master Dewey's came wi' him . . . Constable Pinching got his back bruised wi' one, but Deppity Cobber were th' worst off, poor dog! For—he, he!—he were a-looking up at th' very time when young Solon Stubberd falled down on th' man's very nose. . . . Not as Deppity Cobber ever had any nose worth speakin' about, but ye mid put your specs on now, Miss 'Etty—he, he!—to tell it from a roasted apple, an' that a squashy one—he, he, haw!"

George slapped his leg in ecstasy. Miss Pelleby frowned.

"And after *all this*," she said in severe and solemn tones, "you are dismissed with a mere caution from the Bench." She remembered the rampant snails, battering unrebuked upon the strawberry-vines, lettuces, and young peas in Laurel Cottage garden, and her tone grew softer in spite of herself. "It is true you passed three days in custody of Readstone," she added, "and possibly

Squire Hardwick and Colonel Rogerson considered that."

"Them asked me how I got on i' the lock-up" said George. "An' I tole 'em not so well by 'arf, but what I mid ha' fared better. 'For to be mewed up betwixt stone walls is for gentry, an' likewise to ha' your victuals carried ye i' bright platters,' says I. 'An' I be content wi' my lowliness, I be.' Then says th' Colonel. 'If ye were agin a change, an' wishful t' bide as ye were, why steal Dewey's fowl?' Then I ups an' says—(Dewey bein' there i' th' witnesses' pew i' Readstone Petty Session House)—as how they fowl had tooked my little place for a hin-house, an' I hadn' the heart to say 'em nay. Then Squire Hardwick—Squire be a weazen, spiteful-lookin', gingery little body, dressed no better than my scarecrow I ha' sit over they young 'taties i' th' gardin—Squire Hardwick he says: "Three wicks in Culwich Penitentiary less th' three days this man hev' already spint i' custody. Constable Gossle—Bain't your name Gossle, you new officer over from Dorton Ware?—Constable Gossle will take ye over by train when he's had his dinner. An' I hope th' change of air will do ye good.'"

"Then how does it happen that you are at home now, and not at Culwich Penitentiary?" demanded Miss Pelleby.

"Doan't ye be i' such a hurry Miss 'Etty," said George rebukingly. "Dang me! but when the Squire came out wi' they three wicks, arter seemin'ly bein' so free an' easy, my legs were all of a shake. 'Twas thunder and lightning out of a clear sky, as ye mid say. Th' next as iver I did know—Constable Gossle, th' new officer from over Dorton Ware—Constable Gossle he 'ad my by th' elbow, frisking me up Readstone Main Street like a holiday feller wi' his sweet'art bound for the fair. Ay, an' a long-legged, lean-chopped scrannel man is Gossle, for all the nourishin' fodder he do put away. . . . For ye

see, havin' bin told by th' Justices to get his dinner, he took me home wi' him fust. Now, Miss 'Etty, what do ye think that man had waiting hot for him i' th' oven? The tenderest o' Dewey's speckilt Hamburgs—he he! I did take notice they on'y brought one o' they fowl up i' th' Court as witness to my crime, an' that were th' toughest of them all. So Constable Pinching an' Deppity Cobber mun ha' hed their share, an' if th' meat chawed as sav'ry as the plateful Mrs. Gossle set before me, wi' vegetables an' pudden, I du reckon they enj'yed themselves over a bit."

"Could you eat it?" gasped Miss Pelleby, with visions of speedy judgment upon gastronomical sinners rising before her mental eye.

"Could I eat it, Miss 'Etty?" repeated George, with so many rows of surprised lines forming on his weather-beaten forehead that Miss Hetty forebore. "Ay, I swallowed as much as I could git; for if so be as I had to canker i' jail for three wicks on account o' stealin' they fowl o' Dewey's, 'twas only right I should git one bit o' 'joyment beforehand. And danged if Gossle didn't stand me a quart of beer! He be a heavy drinker wi' his meals, an' a terrible eater, an' when he'd gotten me i' the second-class railway carritch, speedin' over to Culwich terminus what do the man do but fall as fast asleep as Eutychus. He were that sound when th' train steamed into th' station that, do what I could, theer wer' no wakin' of him. I joggles him wi' my elbow, an' I treads upo' his corns, an' 'Wake up!' I says, 'an' take me to prison. I be too shy to go there wi'out ye.' But Gossle did nought but snore an' grunt like a penful o' hogs. When I'd got me safe hid under th' carritch seat he grunted still, an' who d'ye think popped his head in at th' carritch door? Why, Squire Justice Hardwick hisselsn, as had been i' th' train all along." George smiled from ear to ear. "Ay, though I lay too low to see his vinegar face, I heerd his raspy

voice, an' I knowed they bow legs o' his'n. They wer' nigh enough to ha' bitten i' th' calves if so be I'd wanted to spile th' flavour o' my dinner."

"Mercy upon us!" cried Miss Pelleby.

George continued:

"Wake up, my man," says Squire Hardwick to Constable Gossle. 'Where's your sense o' duty? an', by Gad! where's your prisoner?' He shook Gossle to that extent I heerd his teeth rattle, an' what he did to the pore Christian next must ha' bin done wi' a pin, for Gossle woked up wi' a bellow like a mad bull. Next minute, Miss 'Etty, him an' th' Squire were rolling over an' over i' the bottom o' th' carritch, pummellin' one another like Abel and Cain."

George stopped to wipe his face. Miss Pelleby could only gasp.

"Did they—— Was there any bloodshed?"

"Why, Squire lost half a whisker an' got a nasty scratt o' th' cheek, and Gossle had his handkerchief to his nose when the guard o' the London Express helped him to put th' handcuffs on Squire," began George—when the lady stopped him with a scream.

"He handcuffed Squire Hardwick?"

"Ay," nodded George "an' dang me if he didn't do it because he thowt Squire wer' th' prisoner! You do know, Miss 'Etty, how folks wakes up wi' a notion i' their heads stuck like a tick in a sheep, no gettin' of it out. Well, Gossle had bin dreamin' he'd never went to sleep at all, and wakin' up in th' midst o' the towzle with a fellow Christian, danged if he didn't believe it were the prisoner trying to escape. . . . He, he! For all Squire Hardwick swore—and I niver heerd more wanton oathin' i' my days—Gossle stuck to the tale that he were me, an' when two other constables came runnin' up, neither of 'em knowin' Squire, and both of 'em knowin' Gossle, they took Squire (poor dog! I niver see such a object

for dust i' my born days) off to Culwich Penitentiary . . . an' wi' a bad character too, for 'saulting an' battering th' police i' th' execution o' their dooty. While I came home by rail, as pleasant as ye please."

"And what do you think will happen?" cried the horrified Miss Pelleby, springing to her feet.

"They'll wash th' Squire," cried George, with a beaming face of smiles, "and lock him up for th' night i' one o' they clean comfortable cells he bragged about from the Bench at Readstone, wi' a sup o' gruel i' a clean tin can an' a bit o' brown bread as big as a quarter pound o' washin' soap, to kip him i' stomach—an' i' the marnin' he'll know more about his bis'niss as a Justice o' th' Peace than he iver knowed before!"

"But yourself. . . . You unfortunate man, what will become of you when the truth is discovered?" Miss Pelleby moaned.

"Theer's no law i' England," said George solemnly, "to force a man to clap hisself i' prison. Why, if I'd gone by myself an' knocked at Culwich Penitentiary door, I'd ha' bin sent about my bis'niss for a liar. An' if I'd begged Gossle o' my knees to take me th' man 'd ha' denied me to my face, hevin' set his heart like on th' Squire! He, he! No, Miss 'Etty, I was i' th' right to git me back to my own little place. I doan't sleep well out o' th' chair by the fire; they prison beds is too soft for me. . . . An' this bein' feyther's end o' th' wick . . ." the aged victim of heredity ended piously, "please th' pigs! I shall git wonderful drunk when you've gone home. Ay, an' i' th' marnin', if I be spared, I'll look over an' lime they snails for ye."

II

A DESIGN FOR A POSTER

A HOLIDAY FARCE

"I WONDER," says she, in a musical, pleasant voice, to my son-in-law 'Orris Touchitt—'im that wer-ritted my poor girl Eliza into her grave along o' coddlin' his complaints wot 'e hadn't got, an' makin' her gettin' up shirts for 'im an' puttin' a proper London cut into 'is coats, an' weskits an' trowsies, her bein' a tailoress by trade—Little Week-End wantin' all its men for the fish-ing-boats in the season, you'll find a good many women doin' men's work all the year round—"I wonder whether you'd sit for me to sketch you?"

'Orris, he looked as pleased as a dog wi' two tails. I were tinkerin' away at a leak in the hull o' my boat, *Skylark*, what I'd got on the straddles for repairs. Peeps over 'er bows, I does, me being aboard, and overhauled the young lady artis' what was a-speaking.

Pretty? As paint, in a red Tommy Chanter 'at with a light striped blowze and a skirt o' navy serge. A kink in the corner of 'er mouth—a nice red, small one—that meant mischief, an' such a sensible sort o' manner—for a young woman—that I couldn't believe she saw any-think in such a chap as 'Orris.

Well, she'd ast 'im to sit and 'e said 'e would, and before she could stop 'im 'e was off to fetch one o' pore Eliza's Windsor arm-chairs out of the cottage, which

were close by, being, in a manner of speaking, on the foreshore, an' generally washed out by 'igh spring tides. So I leans over the bul'arks and I says, lookin' down on the crown o' the red Tommy Chanter:

"You better be keerful wi' 'Orris, miss. He's a widower on the look-out for another."

She give a jump, an' she an' her friend, another young lady twice 'er age an' 'arf 'er looks, bursts out larfin'. 'An' up comes 'Orris gaspin'—it bein' 'ot weather and him one o' the flabby kind not lookin' at 'is best by no means.

"Where would you like me to sit, miss?" he asks, smiling all over his face as I just 'ad time to see before I bobbed down out of sight.

"Oh," says she, with a look at the other young lady what wasn't 'arf so young, for I'd found a peep-'ole in the old cutter's hull, and 'ad my eye on 'Orris. "I thought at first I would have preferred you to sit standing, but you can sit to me seated if you wish it."

'Orris smiles at 'er, and I could see by his Sunday necktie what he'd got on, with a collar over 'is guernsey, as 'e'd made up 'is mind for fascination. 'An' if you think 'Orris was anything 'andsome to look at, you're mistaken. A nose o' no partic'lar shape on a face like a underdone bun with two burned raisins in it for eyes, and he had 'air like a little gal's Sambo doll and arms and legs like nothin' on earth, and a fat, flabby body. Eliza 'ad pretended to admire 'im, but I knowed better. "Father," she'd say, "'e loves me true, I do believe," an' if I let on as wot 'Orris wasn't 'andsome, 'e'd take an' 'ang 'isself in despair.

'Ere she was, buried only two months, an' 'Orris 'angin' at the apron strings of 'arf the young women in the place, and he'd 'ad one already when 'e married Eliza. "I shall look out before I make my second choice," 'e 'as the cheek to say to me. "And I shall go in for good looks next time bein' a man naturally fond of beauty."

"I shouldn't look in the glass much, then, if I was you," says I, with the blood 'ummin' in my 'ead quite aperplectic at 'is silly way o' goin' on. "You'll upset yourself and spoil your appetite, besides breakin' the glass, one of these days when you smile too unguarded."

Missis Green, a elderly widow herself, as 'ad come in to do up the 'ouse for 'Orris, threw up 'er 'ands and eyes at that. "'Owever can you, Mr. Waylett?" she says in a faint, 'orried voice, "knowin' wot your pore daughter what's gone thought of 'er 'usband's smile."

"That's just wot I do know," I says to that old shark as was ready to swaller up 'Orris, ugly as 'e was, along o' pore Eliza's little cottage wot she'd bought with the furniture in it out of 'er savin's as cook for ten year to a hold gentleman in London, and a bit o' money put away in the Friendly Provident Bank. "Wot she said to 'Orris being only for peace an' quiet, and 'er real 'art bein' spoke out to 'er hold father. 'Wot,' says she to me over an' over agin, 'do 'is looks matter as long as a man's 'art is in the right place?' Now," I says to Missis Green, "not being a doctor, I can't be sure no more than Eliza were about where the right place lays. But I don't think much of the 'art that's in it. It's the kind as do a lot o' beatin' on its own account an' very little on the account of others. As my pore gal found when laying speechless on 'er dying bed, and 'Orris naggin' perpetooal to tell 'im where she'd 'id 'er bank-book. At that 'e gets 'is narsty back up an' tells me the 'ouse is 'is, as well as the bank-book an' 'e'll trouble me to walk out, which I did, takin' care to let it be known in the 'Pure Pint' public-'ouse 'ow my son-in-law 'as bin and be'ayved to me."

There you 'ave 'Orris. Now the young lady artis 'ad asked 'im to let 'er do 'is likeness 'e was firm sure that a real young lady, an' a pretty one, too, 'ad fell in love with him at last.

As 'e stood an' grinned at 'er 'olding the Windsor chair, an' I kep' my eye at the hole in the old boat, I 'eard 'er friend say to 'er in a voice 'arf choked with larfin':

"You're right," says she; "it is," she says, "the funniest type"—I thought she'd called 'Orris a tyke at first, but I found out the meanin' o' the word arterwards an' it didn't do 'Orris's looks no credit—"I've seen for a long time an' perfec' for a comic poster. But you won't make it a absolute likeness," says she. "A man seeing it on the hoardings might feel hurt."

"My dear girl," says her pretty artis' friend in the red Tommy Chanter, "you couldn't hurt that man's feelings. If I am any judge of character," says she, "he'll take it for a compliment, and I can't lose such a chance. It's heaven-sent."

"What did you say was the name of the patent medicine you were to design a poster for?" asks the other young lady wot wasn't so young.

"It's a patent Summer application to prevent pain or irritation from the stings or bites of insects," says the pretty young lady in the red Tommy Chanter, "and the patented name of the preparation is 'Still He Smiles.' Just look at that man and ask yourself if you ever saw a more fatuous smile than he is wearing at this moment. Now, if I get a good likeness of him as he is, drawn boldly with the brush on the background of sand, with a strip of blue sky above, I could put in a gnat, enormously exaggerated, hovering about his nose, and that idiotic expression of his would do the rest."

My 'art fair jumped into my mouth.

"Young ladies," says I, whispering in a still small voice through my peep-'ole, "don't jump or look round, an' take a bit of advice from a father-in-law."

"Oh! it's you again, is it?" says the lady artis', keeping her 'ead straight though. "Don't you think you're rather," she says, "an interfering old person?" says she.

"Call me wot you please," says I, "so long as you gits 'Orris to set the Windsor chair on that soft-lookin' patch o' sand about twenty foot ahead of you, with a tuft of sea-pink stickin' up in the middle. There's a wopses' nest there," I says, "as nobody knows of yet but me, an' I'd made up my mind to smoke it out an' earn sixpence from the County Council for so doin' come to-morrow. An' if you knew 'ow that long-nosed skate-faced, self-satisfied-lookin' lout 'ad treated my dead daughter an' 'er old father," I says, "you'd understand why I wants to see 'Orris served out. Also, if you can git 'im into thinkin' that you're a bit in love wi' 'im, 'e'd go through fire and water before 'e'd move or even let a corner of 'is smile drop, if wild elephants instead of wild wopses was a-comin' at 'im."

"Mr. . . ." says she, calling to 'Orris in 'er clear sweet voice, and I could tell by his silly expression that her face was a-smiling at 'im. "I'm afraid you're a little too near. If you would kindly place the chair on that patch of sand where the tuft of sea-pink is, I should be able to see you to better advantage."

"With pleasure, miss," says 'Orris, obligin' like a lamb, an' he puts the chair where the young lady in the red Tommy Chanter pinted with the end of 'er brush, an' sets down. The sand being soft there, down sinks the 'ind-legs of the Windsor in it, an' they keeps on a-sinking, little by little, till 'Orris's silly face is tilted up at the sky an' 'is chin is nearly restin' on his knees. An', havin' my eye on the wopses' nest, I see a couple come to their front port-hole, look out, an' hurry back to tell the rest that it was a man.

The young lady artis' begins to draw 'Orris in thick black lines on the blue sky an' sand wot she'd slapped in with a dab or two of a brush like a 'ouse-painter's, and 'Orris stares at the sky an' smiles an' smiles. The wopses was a-gathering in knots at their front door, consultin'

where to begin. A scoutin' party was climbin' up over the insteps of 'Orris's shoes with a view to further proceedin's, an' a low faint buzz reached us where we was. I was afraid 'Orris 'ud 'ear it.

"Are you fond of music?" asks the young lady, who prob'ly was afraid of the same thing.

"Passionate fond, miss," says 'Orris, screwin' 'is eyes down to look sweet at 'er. "I remember it when I 'ear you talk, your voice is so much like it."

Then I only could squint down at the top of the red Tommy Chanter. I could see that the young lady was mad at 'Orris 'aving the nerve to pay 'er compliments like that.

"Oh, go on," begs her friend in a chokin' whisper, "draw him out, Nellie, do; there's a dear."

"Please turn your face a little more this way," says the young lady in a soft, kind tone, "and keep on smiling."

"My poor dear wife used to like me to smile, miss," says 'Orris, doing it something fearful. "But I never thought to meet another 'oo felt the same way. Owch!"

A wopse 'ad gie 'im a stab in the ankle with 'is sting, an' I don't blame the insecck overly neither.

"Oh, pray don't change your expression!" calls out the young lady. "It's the essence of my idea that you should smile." Her friend was chokin', an' 'ow she kep' 'er own countenance, I dunno.

"Somethink stinged of me, miss, just then," says 'Orris, pleadin'-like, "an' made me for to call hout."

"You don't mean," says the young lady, stern-like, with the top of her red Tommy Chanter fair shakin' with the larfin' she were keepin' out of 'er voice, "that you would let a little thing like that interfere. When first I saw your face," she goes on, warmin' to 'er work, "I was impressed by it. It struck me as the face of a man who would dare all, endure all, and—bear all for the sake of the woman he——"

She breaks down and chokes with larfin' behind her picture, an' 'Orris 'e gits in 'is 'ead she's cryin' because of 'er disappointment in him. There was wopses in 'is hair an' the bits o' whisker that stuck out at the sides of 'is silly face, an' little clouds of wopses was 'ummin' an' buzzin' about 'im as if they 'ad trouble in makin' up their minds where to begin. An' Little Week-End isn't to call a large place, but most of the people in it was gathered on the beach to stare at 'Orris sittin' on a Windsor chair atop of a wopses' nest lettin' a young lady take 'is portrait. An' I stood up in the *Skylark* an' fair enjoyed the treat.

"Is it for a bet, matey?" calls out a boatman wot didn't like 'Orris, nor he wasn't the only one there.

"Lor! look at them narsty stingin' beastes 'overin' round you, Mr. Touchitt," calls out Missis Green.

"'E don't 'ear you, mum, 'e's 'avin' 'is portrait took," says a fisherman wot 'Orris 'ad done crooll over a bargain. But 'is daughter wot my precious son-in-law 'ad bin makin' sheep's eyes at even before Eliza dropped orf, calls out:

"'E'll be stung to death, 'e will. Somebody interfere or I shall."

"You keep back, Lucy Gilbert, or I'll let you know," says 'Orris, keeping 'is smile unchanged. "'Ave you nearly done, miss?" An' you could plainly see as wot 'e was undergoing agonies.

"Another minute," says the young lady, "and don't you get up till I give you the word, or your portrait will be spoiled. I shall never have such another subject," says she dabbing away right and left very fast, "not if I design picture posters for a hundred years."

"You'll be married before then," says 'Orris in a low voice, trying to look serious an' keep 'is balance at the same time.

"I don't know of anyone who would have me. Do you,

Clara?" says the young lady very innocently to her friend.

"Oh, Kitty, you're too bad!" says the friend. "As if——" She whispered wot came next, and if I couldn't 'ear, nor more could 'Orris.

"You better give that there young widower a chance, miss," says I from behind her. "Got a reputation, 'e 'as for makin' females 'appy, and 'as a nice sunny nature of 'is own. Soon 'as 'e loses one wife 'e starts to look for another. 'E's 'ad two, young as 'e looks."

The crowd gives a kind of titter, which 'Orris pretends not to 'ear. The back legs of the chair was sinkin' deeper an' deeper, and 'e was gettin' more and more uncomfortable.

"I couldn't believe anything bad of a man with a face like his!" says the young lady artist, pretending to say it in a kind of loudish whisper to the other young lady. "I never saw one like it, and I don't believe I ever shall."

"Thank you, miss," says 'Orris, gittin' red to the tops of 'is ears. "It's well to be spoke well of by them as 'as good 'earts."

"Oh, but you have a good heart, I feel sure!" says the young lady, dabbing away for dear life, an' the scarecrow 'Orris looked in 'er picture was only second to the image 'e made out of it. 'E turns 'is 'ead to give 'er a loving look, an' in screwin' 'is neck round, one of the back legs of the chair breaks, an' down 'e goes atop of the wopses' nest, with the population crowdin' one another to git the next sting. 'E 'owls some'ink orful next minnit, an' picks 'isself up an' rushes into the sea.

One young lady larfin' 'er 'ead orf, packs up 'er traps, with the other young lady sayin' "Shoo!" to the wopses. Then bein' ready to go, she calls to me, 'Orris bein' afraid to come ashore there, an' 'avin' waded farther up the beach, dabbin' 'is stung face with 'is wet 'ands an' bein' sorry for 'isself.

"Aren't you sorry for your poor son-in-law, you un-

kind old man?" says she. "Why, he won't be able to get his hat on to-morrow!"

"'E 'ad a swelled 'ead before, miss," says I. "An' you're the better by 'is lovely picter."

"Give 'im this," says she, 'andin' me a five-shillin' piece. An' she then goes off, larfin', with the other.

"I would if we was on speakin, terms," says I to myself, slippin' the cart-wheel into my trowsies pocket. But if 'Orris won't 'ave nothin' to do wi' me, 'tain't my place to make advances.

III

A STRATEGIC MOVEMENT

WHEN Mr. William Jupp, mariner, late of the tramping clay-steamer *Lucy of Looe*, from Stockholm to London Docks with a return-cargo of fresh butter and middle-aged eggs, had drawn his pay as A.B.—a title hotly contested by the captain and mate of the *Lucy of Looe*—a desire to inhale once more the health-giving breezes of his native Kentish Town and renew old ties, somewhat rudely broken a few brief years previously, led the returned prodigal to board a 'bus bound for the north-west.

To nostrils fresh from the ocean breezes, the perfume of haddocks in the Queen's Crescent could give no sensation that was new, and after traversing a grove of these saline articles of diet, tastefully interspersed with cheap haberdashery and old ironware, Mr. Jupp steered down a narrow turning, pausing at the corner public-house to inquire the time, and finally brought-to at the middle house of a squeezey row of five. Unmistakable signs of festivity distinguished the dwelling: the muslin curtains were stiff with recent starch, and the doorsteps were dazzlingly clean. A potman from the public-house at the corner was in the act of delivering such a number of frothing quart pots at the area door that Mr. Jupp's first solo on the front-door knocker, which wore a white calico favour of huge proportions, was rendered faint by emotion. Upon a repetition of the knock, his sister Liz-

zie, a fresh-coloured young woman of twenty-three, in a state of excitement and ribbons which even Mr. Jupp hesitated to attribute to joy at his return, opened to the wanderer.

"What ho, Liz!" said Mr. Jupp with easy playfulness.

"My gracious!" remarked the fresh-coloured young woman, without perceptible rapture, "it's Bill!"

"The same as ever," said Mr. Jupp, by a brotherly salute convincing the young woman that his fraternal feelings and the bristles on his chin were as strong as ever. She squealed, and at the shrill sound the upper half of the body of another young woman—in a similar condition as to ribbons and excitement—appeared above the landing of the kitchen stairs.

"We don't want no coal to-day," cried the second young woman. "Get off my clean doorstep, will you? Here Rover! Ro——"

"It ain't the coalman," said Lizzie, as a chain rattled in the back-yard and a hoarse bark responded to the second young woman's call. "It's Bill come home from sea!"

"Don't make as though you didn't know as what I was a-coming, both of you," said Mr. Jupp in an injured tone, "when you've 'ad a letter to say."

The young women exchanged a glance and shook their heads. "That's another of yours, Bill," said the first young woman. "We haven't 'ad no letter."

"Nor you didn't write us none, neither," said the second young woman. "If anythink came, it was a post-card!"

"It were a post-card," said the injured Mr. Jupp, "with a pictur' of the King o' Sweden on it."

"And no stamp," said the second young woman. "The postman wanted me to pay tuppence for it, so I wouldn't take it in. It was just like you, he said."

"The pictur' of the King of Sweden?" inquired the flattered Mr. Jupp.

"No; the meanness of posting it without a stamp," said the second sister.

"I'll remember that postman when I see 'im," said the injured Mr. Jupp. "Meantime, are you two gals a-going to let me come aboard—in, I mean—or ain't you?"

"I suppose we must," said Bessie, the second young woman, who was the elder of the Misses Jupp. "Troubles never come singly," she added.

"It never rains but it pours!" remarked Lizzie, as she economically opened the hall door just wide enough to admit the form of the returned wanderer, and warmly urged him to wipe his boots once more upon the mat which adorned the sacred threshold of home. "No, don't you go in there!" she added hastily, as Mr. Jupp extended his hand towards the knob of the front-parlour door. "That's where it's all laid out an' waiting!"

"Not a corpse!" said Mr. Jupp, hastily withdrawing his hand.

Both the girls giggled, and Mr. Jupp, who had a rooted aversion to corpses, felt relieved. "I noo if it was, it couldn't be neither o' you," he explained, as he followed his sisters to the basement kitchen, "'cos the best ones of a family are them what always gets took fust. Elfred, or Joe, I expected it 'ad 'ave bin, or father. 'Ow is the old man, since we're talkin'?"

"You may well ask how father is!" said Bessie, tossing her head. "You wouldn't need to ask if you knew *where* he is."

"Why, where is 'e?" inquired Mr. Jupp's puzzled son.

"He's at church!" replied Lizzie. She exchanged a knowing wink with her sister, and together the young women enjoyed the pictorial changes of expression which rapidly succeeded one another on the mobile countenance of their elder brother.

"At church!" gasped Mr. Jupp at length. "Father! Why, what's come over 'im?"

"You may well ask," said Bessie. "Do you call to mind the little sweet-an'-tobacco shop in Railway Lane, kep' by a widow what never really was one—a Mrs. Clark, with a red nose an' a lot o' little ringlets of 'oburn 'air? You do? Well, that's what's come over father!"

"Sweet-an'-tobacco shop in Railway Lane! 'Ow could that come over——?" Mr. Jupp was beginning, when an inner light dawned upon him, and he heavily smote his knee. "You mean the widder!" he cried. "Well, I'm blowed! An' so father's up to a bit of a lark at 'is age! Well done, 'im!"

"If you call gettin' married to a red-nosed old cat a bit of a lark," said Bessie, "that's what he is up to this minute. Joe an' Elfred 'ave gone to be bridesmaids," she added, as Mr. Jupp gave vent to a piercing whistle of astonishment, "as me and Liz couldn't be spared from 'ome."

"You could 'ave got a gal in," suggested Mr. Jupp, whose protracted abstinence from malt liquor—his last pint having been absorbed at the corner public-house previously mentioned—rendered his brain preternaturally clear.

"I reckon we could, silly," retorted Lizzie; "an' left her to look after the weddin'-breakfast an' take in the beer."

"I could 'a' done that for you," hazarded Mr. Jupp.

"I lay you could," said Bessie, with an unsisterly emphasis that brought a flush to the brow of the returned prodigal; "and watch the furniture, too."

"Watch the furniture!" echoed Mr. Jupp. "For fear of bailiffs, d'yer mean?"

"For fear of stepmothers, which is worse," said Lizzie Jupp, her ribbons bristling with defiance of the lady who was at that moment receiving the vows of the elder Mr.

Jupp. "You've no idea what a under'anded, artful thing she is, for all 'er mealy-mouthed talk."

"But we've got the better of 'er, mealy-mouth an' all," said Bessie, "or we shall when her and father 'ave started on the wedding journey to their new 'ome. There's all 'is clothes packed in that corded box in the passage, ready to go away."

"'Ome!" echoed Mr. Jupp. "Why, ain't this their 'ome?"

"Not while me an' Liz an' Elfred an' Joe are inside of it, whatever you may be pore-spirited enough to think," said Bessie.

"Why, ain't it—ain't it big enough?" hazarded Mr. Jupp, his eye questing furtively in search of the beer-cans.

"No!" said Bessie plumply.

"It used to be, when mother was alive," said Mr. Jupp, whose tongue clave to the roof of his mouth with thirst.

"But it isn't now," said Lizzie. "The fust thing me and Bess done, when father broke the news of 'is engagement, was to move 'is bed an' chest of drawers an' wash-stand an' things up into the little attic in the roof, an' take his large first-floor front bedroom for ourselves. Then we divided the other two bedrooms between Elfred and Joe, an' dared 'em to move out. Father tried 'ard to come over 'em to change with 'im, and once or twice he managed it; but we always changed his things back to the attic whenever he moved 'em out, an' at last he got resigned an' took a little furnished house at 'Ighgate Clayfields for himself an' his bride."

"What about the rent o' this one?" asked Mr. Jupp, with bluntness.

"There's only two quarters more to pay to the Building Society," said Bessie, "and then the house is ours."

"Father's, you mean," Mr. Jupp was going to say, but the look in Bessie's eye silenced the words upon his

tongue, and he turned the conversation, dwelling upon the dryness of the weather and the thirst-provoking properties of the air of Kentish Town. The arid lack of sympathy with which his hints were ignored was fast converting him from a man and a brother into a mere man, when the legs of a cab-horse were seen to pass the window of the basement kitchen, from which all light was immediately afterwards blocked out by the body of a four-wheeled cab. A moment later Mr. Jupp's latch-key was heard in the door, which his daughters had thoughtfully bolted.

"I thought it might be you," said Lizzie, as, after a protracted interval, during which Mr. Jupp senior had been heard to swear, she admitted the happy couple, followed by the bridesmaids, Joe and Alfred; a sandy-haired, middle-aged niece of the bride, attired in the blue serge and poke-bonnet of the Salvation Army; a stout lady in a velvet mantle and feathers, who had taken over the lease, fixtures, stock, and goodwill of the little sweet-and-tobacco shop in the Railway Lane, and who had brought her little girl; and three of Mr. Jupp's male cronies and club associates who had come to give their friend countenance and support.

"If you thought it was me—us, I mean," said Mr. Jupp, with a fatherly scowl, "'ow is it you didn't open the door?" He led his blushing bride past his daughters, threw open the door of the front room where the wedding-breakfast was spread, and smoothed his corrugated brow as he viewed his well-spread board. "Eliza, you set at the 'ead, side o' me," he continued. "Missis Jenks, you an' Lotty come 'ere on my left. Clarkson, look after the bottom of the table; there's a cold loin o' pork out o' your own shop what we'll look to you to carve. Widge, you git on the left 'and o' Clarkson, an' Blaberry, you set on 'is knife side. Joe an' Elfred, stow yourselves where you can. Now, then, gals, where's the beer?"

But neither Mr. Clarkson, who was gallant as are all butchers, nor Mr. Blaberry, who was a builder, nor Mr. Widgett, who kept an oil and hardware store, would be seated before the Misses Jupp, whose natural charms heightened by ribbons and indignation, had created an instantaneous impression.

"We're coming directly," said Bessie, with a fascinating smile, bestowed impartially upon all three men, "an' so's the beer. No wonder pore father wants a drop, after all he has gone through this morning."

"Gone through?" echoed the stout lady, who, having acquired the sweet-and-tobacco shop upon low terms, was temporarily an enthusiastic partisan of the new Mrs. Jupp. "Gone through?"

"You're a bit deaf, ain't you?" said Bessie, bridling. "So's father, in one ear, and both when sensible people try to offer 'im advice. I've half wished I was, more than once o' late, when I've 'appened to over'ear remarks as 'ave bin made. What was it, Liz, the cabman said when you took 'im out 'is fare?"

"'No fool like an old fool,' I think it was," said Lizzie, serving out the beer and accidentally passing over the bride, an instance of neglect which the incensed bridegroom remedied by wresting the jug from his rebellious offspring and helping his wife himself. "But 'e 'ad a shilling in 'is mouth, and it didn't come out clear. Move up a bit more, Joe; another plate 'as got to get in at this corner. Ain't it pleasant," she continued brightly—"we shall be just thirteen at table—with Bill?"

Mr. Jupp senior's loaded fork had been arrested on its way to his mouth at the sound of the prodigal's name. As the door creaked modestly open, his jaw visibly dropped, but he shook hands with the thirteenth guest with some show of cordiality, and introduced her eldest stepson to the new Mrs. Jupp by the simple process of jerking his chin at the gentleman and immediately nudg-

ing the lady in the side. Rendered venomous by the attacks of the sisters, the late incumbent of the sweetstuff-and-tobacco shop saw in the awkward form and embarrassed countenance of the returned wanderer a suitable sacrifice, and immediately proceeded to offer him up, by asking how long he had been away.

"Five years!" said Mr. William Jupp with brevity.

"Dear, dear!" ejaculated the new Mrs. Jupp, "and did they give you as much as that?"

"Did who give him what?" queried Mr. Jupp senior in some surprise.

"The judge and jury, I meant, but I was afraid it 'ud wound 'is feelings to mention 'em," explained the new Mrs. Jupp delicately.

"What maggot 'ave you got into your 'ead now," demanded the bridegroom, "'bout judges and juries? Bil 'as bin away to sea."

"I'm shore I beg pardon," apologised the new Mrs Jupp, as her eldest stepson commanded his swollen feelings and addressed himself to cold pork and beer. "I must 'av bin thinking of your pore wife's brother Bert what broke the jeweller's winder with a brick an' stol a trayful o' wedding-rings."

"I wonder at 'im, if 'e did," said Mr. William Jupp glaring pointedly at his new parent over a chop bone, at this untimely reference to the undeniable blot on the family scutcheon. "One weddin'-ring's enough for mos men."

"An' too much for some!" said his younger brother Joe, stimulated to the sally by the shrill giggles of his sisters.

"Are you a-going to set by and hear me insulted at your—at my own table, an' on such a day as this?" demanded the bride shrilly of the elder Mr. Jupp.

"Joe," said that gentleman in a voice rendered thick by emotion and mashed potato, "you an' me'll 'ave

word in the back-yard by-an'-by. You ain't too old an' too big to whop—whatever others may be."

"Come, come!" said Clarkson, who loved peace.

"'Birds in their little'—you know! Who'll 'ave a bit more pork?" and he smiled genially as he contemplated the fast-vanishing joint, which he had supplied.

"Not for me!" said the second Mrs. Jupp, in a faint, ladylike voice as she pushed away her empty plate. "I don't wish to put anybody off of it but it tastes a bit measly, to my mind."

"Measly!" gasped the outraged butcher, crimson from his throttling collar to the tips of his large ears. "Me sell measly meat! Look here——"

"Don't pay no attention, Mr. Clarkson," said Lizzie in a loud, bright, cheerful whisper. "Don't you know them as ain't used to 'ave no fresh meat are always the 'ardest to please? Bloaters all the week round, an' 'block ornaments' on Sundays—that's about 'er mark!"

"If you're a man, Jupp," panted the incensed bride, "you'll show it now, by standing up for your wife!"

"What's the matter now?" growled Mr. Jupp senior, looking up from a plateful of apple-pie, as his spouse sank back in her chair, making noises in her throat suggestive of clucking poultry and clocks running down. "What 'as anybody bin an' said now? You're too feeling, Eliza, that's what you are."

"There, there!" said the stout lady soothingly, as the poultry and the clocks continued: "there, there's a dear! Give 'er a drop of beer, Mr. Jupp, sir—the jug's your way. See, now," she continued, as Mr. Jupp's compliance promptly flooded the table-cloth, "he's 'elped you as 'e loves you—as the saying is!"

"There's nothing in the glass but froth," sobbed the bride, after an unavailing attempt to drink out of the tumbler.

"Give 'er the jug," suggested Alfred, who had not yet

offered any contribution to the general conversation. Reading in his father's eye an appointment in the backyard similar to Joe's, the youth choked, and the elderly young lady in Salvation Army uniform patted him obligingly upon the back.

"That's what comes of eatin' in a 'urry," said the stout lady rebukingly.

"Don't blame the pore boy," said his new mother in a sudden access of affection, "you'd bolt, if you was kep' as short o' food as Elfred is. Ribbons an' fal-lals has to be paid for at the draper's, if two young women as ought to know better *want* to be took for worse than what they are." This home-thrust delivered at the Misses Jupp rendered Bessie, for the moment, incapable of speech. Lizzie was about to plunge into the arena, when the passage of an enormous furniture-van down the narrow thoroughfare without shook the small house so violently that she was obliged to cling to her next neighbours for support. These being Mr. Clarkson and Mr. Widgett, who manifested gratification at being clung to, the indignation of Mrs. Jupp was raised to boiling-point.

"Well, I'm sure!" she said, with a scandalised glare at the offenders. "Nice goings on!"

"Nice goings off, you mean," said the humorous Mr. Widgett, pointing with his unoccupied arm to the word "Removals," which was painted in child-high yellow letters on the passing vehicle.

"Somebody's doin' a quittin' to-day, ain't 'em?" observed the stout lady.

"Prob'ly them Gadgers at Number Five," said Mr. Jupp, hastily. "Told me yesterday 'e thought o' movin' Gadger did."

"The van's stoppin' 'ere!" squealed the little girl who had accompanied the stout lady, as the house left off trembling and the grinding wheels stopped.

"It's a mistake," said Mr. Jupp, hastily bolting the last

mouthful of pie. "I'll go an' tell 'em——" He rose, but not as quickly as his daughters.

"Don't you trouble, father," said Lizzie, with unmistakable meaning, as she turned the key in the door, withdrew it, and placed it in her pocket.

"You sit down and finish your beer, father," said Bessie warningly. "You'll have to start in a few minutes now if you want to get into your new place by tea-time."

"Out away by 'Ighgate Clayfields, ain't it?" queried Mr. Blaberry.

Some secret emotion impeded the speech of Mr. Jupp and flushed his countenance, as he replied that the localisation of Mr. Blaberry was in every way correct, and opened a bottle of unsweetened gin.

"Such a dismal, lonesome, out-o'-the-way kind o' place to settle in, I should 'ave thought," said the Salvation niece of Mrs. Jupp hesitatingly.

"Not for a noo married couple, my dear!" said the stout lady, taking a little cold water in a glass of gin.

"It's what I call a hideel situation—that's what I call it!" said Mr. Jupp, sipping at a tumbler he was mixing for his wife and openly winking over the edge of it. "Down near the bottom of a nooly opened street with a railway-embankment blockin' up the end, an' a reclaimed bit o' waste ground at the back. No shops 'cept a chandler's, which is also a greengrocer's an' a butcher's an' a baker's an' grocer's in one. No drapers, no theayter, no singin'-'all, no cookin'-club nor Young Women's Friendly, which is another name for sweetheartin' on the sly. Quarter of a mile to walk to catch your train, an' a 'bus every 'arf-'our to the places you don't want to go to."

"Well, I hope you'll both be 'appy there!" said Bessie, laughing unrestrainedly. "How those vanmen are bumping the things about next door!"

"They've done now!" said Mr. Jupp, lighting a large,

pale cigar in a red waisband, as the heavy doors of the van banged to, and the vehicle lumbered away. "They 'adn't much to take," he added incautiously. "'Ere! Where are you off to?" For Lizzie Jupp, with cheeks some degrees paler in hue, had risen and hurried to the door.

"I—I thought I'd 'ave a look at the kitchen fire!" she faltered, her uneasiness increased by the discovery that the new Mrs. Jupp was smiling.

"Blow the kitchen fire!" said Mr. Jupp lightly. "Eliza, get your bonnet on. Joe, you run and fetch a cab."

"There's one waiting at the corner, outside the 'Frothing Pot,'" said Bessie affectionately. "Me and Liz saw to that!" She produced a large bag of paper confetti and a second-hand boot from a drawer in the side-board, and, in a pelting blizzard of coloured paper, Mr. Jupp, his box, and his newly wedded wife, hurried through the hall, down the doorsteps and into the cab, into which Alfred was hauled at the last moment by the author of his being. The door banged, the second-hand boot shattered the window, and the married couple had started on their honeymoon.

"Father feels shy, I suppose," said Lizzie, giggling as she settled her ribbons and exchanged a look of triumph with her sister, "or he wouldn't have took Elfred."

"He may keep him if he likes," said Bessie Jupp. "Always too much of a favourite, Elfred's bin, to please me. Now, Mr. Clarkson, will you have a cup of tea after all this excitement, or something better?"

The gallant Mr. Clarkson said he would have something better, and took it in the shape of a kiss, Messrs. Widdett and Blaberry following the example of the bold butcher, in claiming like tribute, the payment of which was ungrudgingly witnessed by Joe and Mr. William Jupp, while rousing shivering emotions of disgust and contempt in the bosoms of the stout lady, the Salvation

niece, and the little girl, whose expression of outraged virtue was wonderful for so immature a performer. These undesired guests had just reassumed their discarded headgear and taken an unregretted leave, and the suggestion of spending the rest of the evening at the theatre had just been mooted by the popular Clarkson and hailed with rapture by the two young ladies, when a thundering tattoo at the hall door caused the stout lady to start and scream, and the unfastening of the portal revealed the boy Alfred, hatless, crimson, splashed with mud, and gasping for breath.

"My gracious goodness!" cried the stout lady, "there's bin a accident!"

"Anything happened?" demanded Clarkson.

"What's up, Elf?" said his elder brother.

"Can't you speak?" urged his sister Lizzie. "You're frightening everybody."

"Gasping like a——" Bessie did not say like a "fish," because fish have done all their gasping before they come to be sold in Kentish Town; she substituted "like a bellows," which satisfied everybody. "Is anybody ill—or dead?" she ended.

The boy Alfred gasped once more and said "Father!"

"What?"

"No!"

"You don't mean——"

"I do," said Alfred loudly—"that is, leastways, 'e ain't quite," he continued glibly. "'E's 'ad a sudden stroke, an' they've carried 'im into Bickford the chemist's, in the Kentish Town Road; an' 'e've sent me 'ome to say as what's 'appened is a judgment on 'im for marryin' agin 'is dear daughters' wishes. An' he wants the one what always loved 'im best to come an' witness 'is will, 'cos 'e means to leave everythink to 'er. You're to 'urry there at once without goin' upstairs to put on your 'ats, he says, in case he changes 'is mind."

"The one what always loved 'im best. That means me," said Bessie, as she snatched her errand-going hat from a peg in the hall. "I was always the one pore father liked best of all."

"Ah, but I was the one what made the most of 'im!" said Lizzie. She wrested the hat from her sister's grasp, and darted out of the house, down the steps, and round the corner in an instant.

"Cat!" ejaculated Bessie. Without an instant's delay, she forcibly deprived Alfred of his cap, and ran down the street after Lizzie. Messrs. Clarkson, Widgett, and Blaberry, left standing on the steps, exchanged dubious glances.

"I wonder which of 'em he thinks loves 'im best?" said Mr. Blaberry, who was naturally a reflective man.

"I wonder which o' them Jupp'll leave his bit o' money to?" said Mr. Clarkson. "I wish I was quite sure. As to their love for 'im, it seems to me there's more bone than meat about it—not that I wish to prejudice you against 'em."

"You couldn't if you tried," said Mr. Widgett ambiguously. He started at an amble, and Clarkson and Blaberry guessed that his destination was the chemist's in the Kentish Town Road. Mutually on their guard against the meanness that strives to grasp an advantage, they captured their hats and followed. The boy Alfred, grinning cheerfully, watched them depart.

Joe, who had a soft heart, snivelled.

Mr. William Jupp, who had hastened back into the banquetting-chamber to fortify himself against approaching bereavement, helped himself to the beer that was left, and then balanced the gin-bottle, in which a small quantity yet remained, upside down upon his underlip.

"It's what 'appens to all on us," he remarked piously, his eyes still riveted piously upon the ceiling. "Slipped 'is cable by now, 'e 'as, I expect. Ploorisy or pewmonia,

or 'plexy, or 'paralicks, or one o' them sicknesses what all seems to begin with the same letter. What did the chemist say it was, Elfred?"

"The chemist said," growled the familiar accents of Mr. Jupp senior, as his horrified son, with a yell, dropped the bottle and reeled backwards into the fortunately empty fireplace—"the chemist said it were the best joke 'e ever 'eard of in all 'is life, played on two o' the brazenest-faced 'ussies what ever laid their 'eads together to turn their own father out of 'is own 'ouse an' 'ome. Come in 'ere, Eliza; you're in your own place. Bolt the front door Elf; I see them two a-running down the street." He threw up the parlour window and leaned with dramatic carelessness upon the sill, as the flushed faces of Bessie and Lizzie appeared above the level of the area railings. "Bin 'aving a bit of exercise?" their parent queried, with a sarcastic grin. "Nice warm day for a run if you don't overdo it. I see you 'ave, an' upset yourselves," he added kindly, as the outwitted sisters burst, with one accord, into loud sobs. "Better git 'ome an' lay down an' 'ave a cup o' tea—leastways, the one that lays down," he added; "the one what don't 'll 'ave to git the tea."

"Fa-father!" sobbed Bessie. "Oh, what a wicked trick you've bin an' played us!"

"Oh, father," wailed Lizzie—"making out as you was dyin' an' all!"

"You're drawin' public attention to the 'ouse," said Mr. Jupp severely. "Go 'ome an' torse up for that cup o' tea!"

"This is our 'ome!" sniffed Bessie.

"You know it is!" added Lizzie tearfully.

"Not a bit of it," said Mr. Jupp genially, his arm affectionately round the waist of the second Mrs. Jupp. "Your 'ome is now the little 'ouse at 'Ighgate Clayfields, in the noo street. You'll find all your clothes an' things

there," he added; "I 'ad 'em took away while we 'aving breakfast—lent the van-driver my spare latch—I did, an' two pair of old socks what 'im an' 'is mate on over their boots, so as not to be over'eard. Now along 'ome. The rent's paid in advance for a ' quarter. I make you a present o' that."

"Oh, father!" wailed the outcast Peris. "O father!"

"You go to Highgate" said Mr. Jupp, and shut window down.

IV

A RELIEF EXPEDITION

WHEN intelligence of the alarming illness of Mr. Jupp, late of Arabella Terrace, Queen's Crescent, Kentish Town, was imparted to the children of his first wife, per medium of a soiled and wilted postcard in the handwriting of his second—a missive so economically directed that it had been delivered at and rejected as “Not known” from eleven different addresses in the metropolitan suburbs—a general council or indaba was held. This, as the writer of the postcard had enjoined upon the Jupps complete abstention from the indulgence of any dutiful impulse to seek the society of the sufferer, naturally ended in the despatch of a Relief Expedition of one to the minute country farm in the remote country district to which Mr. Jupp, impelled by the yearning to taste fresh air and home-grown cabbages, had betaken himself three years previously, with his new wife, his youngest son Alfred, and his old house-dog River, whose bark had been impaired by the passage of time, but whose bite was nearly as good as ever.

The Relief Expedition consisted of the exile's eldest son, Mr. William Jupp, ex-mariner, who, in default of a professional outlet for his obvious talents, had been for some time actively engaged in swelling the ranks of the unemployed.

A bottle of whisky, warranted genuine Scotch, was purchased for two and elevenpence at “The Bunch of

Grapes" by the invalid's affectionate daughter Bessie, and a bundle of twelve cigars, from the emporium of the Zermuda Company next door, warranted to give especial satisfaction for a shilling, formed the dutiful contribution of his second son Joe. As the entire pecuniary resources of Mr. William Jupp's pockets were found, upon family examination, to consist of a French half-penny, the amount of his railway fare, with an additional sixpence for refreshments, was contributed with some reluctance by Miss Lizzie Jupp.

"Copcut Elm Farm, Hoppen Frogmarsh, near Crawlingford, Berks, that's the full address," she said, as with cold distrust she accompanied the Expedition to the railway station, "and don't you forget it. What took father such a ways off is more than I ever could understand, unless 'e wanted to 'ide from 'is own flesh and blood!" she added, with unconsciously perfect grasp of the paternal motive. "I've only took a single ticket to Crawlingford," she continued acidly, "becos if father is glad of your com'ny, he'll want you to stop over the week, and if 'e ain't, 'e'll pay the 'ome fare to be rid of you. So good-bye, and mind you don't come 'ome without knowin' 'ow pore father 'as made out 'is will."

It was the morning of a bitter January day that saw the Expedition set out from Paddington. The weather was quite seasonable, little pieces of damp snow flew into the carriage whenever the windows of the third-class smoker were lowered, or the doors opened for the exit of a passenger. The pollard poplars of the Thames Valley loomed ghostly through a frosty fog, the blue-nosed porters beat their chests as though in agonies of operatic remorse, and the bottle of whisky carried in the inside pocket of Mr. William Jupp's venerable pilot jacket began to burn there. As the venerable clasp-knife carried by the Expedition contained a corkscrew, it was not long before the spirits in the bottle had evapo-

rated to the last drop, and those of Mr. William Jupp had been elevated to the highest pitch. He lighted cigar after cigar from a rapidly shrinking bundle with a misty conviction that errands of mercy brought their own reward, and that so far the Expedition had been decidedly a success.

Ere long, quitting the shelter of the third-class smoker for the smallest station he had ever seen, announced in Brobdingnagian letters to be Crawlingford, Mr. William Jupp negotiated the descent of a steep flight of asphalted stairs in a series of alarming slides and flounders, and had emerged into a landscape unmarked by any more salient features than hedges, ditches, pollard trees and snow, before he realised that he had not the faintest recollection of the address at which presumably reclined a parent in extremity.

Two hours of heavy walking but confirmed him in the conviction that the Expedition was lost, and passing between a straggling double row of very small cottages without barns or hayricks, and coming, at the end of what was announced per finger-post to be the village of Market Rumbling, upon a beerhouse, he realised that he must drink or perish, and remembering that the only coin now in his possession was the halfpenny of the French description, acutely regretted the enforced separation from family and friends. Then a happy thought occurred to him. There still remained half-a-dozen cigars, only slightly frayed from pocket friction. Holding three of these between his first and second fingers, in the approved style of a hawker, he entered the tap-room and offered the nicotian delicacies in exchange for the quart of beer for which his being craved.

The landlord scowled.

"No, no," he said hastily, "us don't do that sort o' business 'ere no more. Been cheated already by a sailor-lookin' chap o' your sort. Like enough to you 'a' been

your brother. Brown paper his cigars was, wi' tea-leaves inside, an' but that I 'ad the sense to give my boy here the fust to try, dog sick they'd ha' made me. Wouldn't 'em, Fred?"

The pimply young man the landlord addressed grunted in a surly manner, and went on filling a mineral-water merchant's crate with empty sodas. Rendered desperate by the close vicinity of the beer-pulls, Mr. William Jupp drew the French halfpenny from his pocket.

"I've got a curious coin 'ere," he said with a simple air. "Might be vallyble to anybody what understands such things. If you 'ave a fancy to 'ave it, it's yours for a pint; only say the word."

The landlord said several words and pointed to the door. Mr. Jupp, noting a disposition on the part of the pimply Fred to speed the parting guest, delicately quitted the premises. A thirst raised to frenzy by the sight and odour of the liquid denied by an arid Fate now suggested to the castaway mariner a method by which the thirst that now consumed him might be relieved. It was getting dusk. A small and aggressively scarlet sun was in the act of retiring for the night behind curtains of dun-coloured vapour, the powdery snow creaked under the footsteps of the wayfarer, and a knife-edged easterly breeze sawed aggressively at his tingling ears. People were having tea, lights began to twinkle in the cottages, the smell of buttered toast was fragrant on the air, and outside the illuminated parlour window of a prosperous-looking cottage dwelling that abutted on the side-walk, Mr. William Jupp halted and struck up a hymn with more strength of lung than accuracy of musical memory, and greater determination to attract attention than to evoke applause.

There was only one Agnostic, only one Socialist, only one Free Thinker, and only one avowed Republican and Anti-Monarchist in the village of Market Rumbling, and

he made up for the small numbers of his party by the excessive strength and virulence of his opinions. The waits had waited upon him nightly in Christmas week, only consenting to curtail their programme upon the hasty production of a shot-gun, and the musical efforts of Mr Jupp now fell like oil upon the still glowing fires of his indignation. Rising from the bed to which, still fully dressed and with his hat and boots on, he was wont to retire when the birds sought their nests, he crept to the lattice, opened it softly, and looked out. His wife, a person of normal habits, was taking tea in the parlour-kitchen below, and to the doomed melodist outside its muslin-blinded window her warning gestures seemed to betoken admiration.

"Wants me to tip 'er another verse," soliloquised Mr. Jupp, who had filled up gaps in the first with fragments of a strictly secular nature. "If she don't stand tuppence after this, it'll be sheer robbery." He pressed his nose against the frosty pane and sang until the glass was clouded with his respiration and the inner hedge of geraniums fairly vibrated.

Then the contents of a water-pail of capacious size descended impetuously from above, the lattice closed smartly, and Mr. Jupp, with chattering teeth and streaming garments, retired to a safe distance from the cottage, from which he swore at the occupant of its upper chamber, until loss of voice caused him to desist.

"Call yourself a Christian, do you, you 'eathen swine!" he shouted, impotently shaking his dripping fist at the imperturable upper lattice.

"No, I don't!" said the Agnostic cottager, suddenly putting out a bushy-bearded head of unwashed complexion, adorned by a crushed felt hat firmly tied down with a blue cotton handkerchief. "Nothing o' the kind. You come singin' hymns under my winder again, and I'll show you what I am, with a cartridge o' small shot!

It was the organist set you on, or the schoolmaster. Deny it and you're a liar!"

"I'm a liar, then," said the discontented Mr. Jupp, writhing as small rivulets of chilly water trickled from his sleeves into his pockets and meandered down his spine, to find refuge in his socks.

"I believe you!" said the Agnostic cottager, and slammed the window.

The milk of human kindness was now completely curdled in the bosom of Mr. Jupp. His belief in the virtue of his fellow-creatures, his faith in the soundness of his own intentions, with the filial devotion that had spurred his footsteps in the supposed direction of the parental bedside, had vanished. So had the last recollected fragment of the elder Jupp's address. He found himself penniless in an unknown and hostile country, and the advisability of taking the next train back to London loomed before him, as largely as the impossibility of doing so without the money for a return ticket. Under the stress of circumstances his moral character deteriorated rapidly. He resolved to beg the return fare and a trifle over from the next prosperous-looking person he should meet, and if nothing was to be got by begging, of the profitableness of which as a profession he entertained grave doubts, to have recourse to measures of a desperate nature, involving, if necessary, highway robbery with violence, preferably of the one-sided kind.

It was getting darkish. The last rays of the smoky sunset had vanished, the uncertain glimmering whiteness of the snow seemed to have absorbed whatever light was left. Turning up his wet coat-collar and unconsciously assuming a slouch consistent with his budding purpose, Mr. William Jupp, in squelching boots, struck out doggedly in search of an opportunity. It approached him presently in the shape of a burly man, who had his head

enveloped in a fur cap with earflaps, and his neck wound into so many folds of a woollen comforter that his nose, which was prominent and of a fiery red, and a bush of iron-grey whisker on either side of a conjectural countenance, alone remained exposed to the weather. He wore a shaggy greatcoat, and drove with the aid of a switch an animal whose grunt, despite the dark, advertised it as the inhabitant of a pigsty.

Imparting to his naturally surly tones something of the oiliness cultivated by the habitual mendicant, Mr. William Jupp made up to the driver of the hog, wished him the compliments of the season, and solicited his aid for a fellow-creature in trouble.

"I'm in trouble myself, if it comes to that," said the burly, grey-whiskered driver of the hog, in husky tones that, filtered through the thickness of the muffler that covered his mouth, awakened no slumbering echo in the memory of Mr. William Jupp. "'Aven't I got this 'ere hog to drive 'ome a matter of four mile when I'd set my 'art on selling 'im along with 'is brother to the butcher at Warming Crossways—what can on'y do with one, along of the influenza 'aving broke out among 'is best customers? 'Aven't I got to keep the beast over Christmas?" the speaker continued garrulously, "by which time, out o' sheer aggravation at Earl Roberts bein' preferred afore 'im, he'll 'ave fretted 'isself thin. Earl Roberts is 'is twin brother; 'is name is Lord Kitchener. Don't pay me no compliments; I didn't baptize neither of them. I took 'em over with a litter o' piglings from the man what I bought my little farm off three year ago, an' a nice cheat 'e was, to do 'im justice. What are you turning back along o' me for? I haven't a penny to give you, I wouldn't give you one if I 'ad it, and I'm not in love with company o' your kind. Why don't you go your own ways and let me go mine?"

"Beg par'n, gentleman, the sound o' your kindly voice,

gentleman," persisted Mr. William Jupp, not unsuccessfully sustaining his adopted character of professional mendicant, as he persistently followed in the footsteps of the muffled-up man who drove the hog, "'as melted my 'ard 'art and told me that all 'uman beings do not regard the pore as the dirt under their feet. I am a orphan, kind gentleman, without a relation or a friend in the 'ole world, and not a blessed mag but this 'ere half-penny. It is 'ard on a British sailor what 'as served 'is time——"

"An' deserved what 'e got, I lay!" growled the hog-driver, who would have walked faster if the hog had been agreeable.

"—served 'is time in the Royal Navy, and bin broke down in 'is 'ealth," said Mr. William Jupp, marvelling at his own fluency, "by the bursting of a turrick on a nooly invented submarine. With burning flames around me, gentleman, I clung to my post——"

"You ought to ha' chucked it overboard, an' yourself with it, an' floated ashore that way," objected the man who drove the pig. "I've a son in the seafaring way myself, an' even 'e would 'ave 'ad sense enough for that, I reckon."

"I come ashore at Portsmouth, gentleman, on'y yes'-day," pursued Mr. William Jupp, "and 'ave been laying in an 'orspital ever since at the p'int o' death. Now, discharged an' without a single halfpenny——"

"Why, you showed me one just now," hypercritically objected the driver of the pig.

"Without clo'es to cover me from the crool cold, or boots to protect my pore feet from the stones of the 'ard 'ighway——" pathetically continued Mr. William Jupp.

"Then," said the man, correcting a deviation of the hog with the switch, and quickening his pace in the vain endeavour to outweary the determined victim of an ungrateful country—"then you've stole the decent suit and

the good boots what you're a-wearin' now. An' I don't know but what I shouldn't be doing my duty to the neighbour'ood in 'anding you over to the police. Git on, Kitchener!"

Kitchener squealed protestingly at a reminder from the switch, and broke into a trot. So did his owner, so did Mr. William Jupp.

"Beg par'n, gentleman," he recommenced, as they plodded between the thatched houses, whose lighted windows still revealed family parties gathered at the domestic tea-board. "If you'll believe me——"

"Do I look like a fool?" asked the driver of the pig with simple directness.

"It's too dark for me to see your face, gentleman," said Mr. Jupp, with great want of tact.

"And it's too dusk for me to make out yourn clear," said the hog-driver, "but I can guess your way without that. You've bin sunk in a submarine or blown up in a powder magazine, or discharged from the Army, after being wounded on the battlefield, or you've been buried in a coal-mine, or chopped up in a sausage factory. Say one, say all; I don't contradict you. But whatever tale you're ready to pitch, it all comes to the same thing, an' that's money out of my pocket."

So completely had the wind been taken out of Mr. Jupp's sails by this anticipation of his confidence, that he perforce was silent as he racked his invention for something not mentioned by the driver of the hog. Keeping pace with him during the throes of composition, for he showed no disposition to stop—

"I 'ave a aged father, kind gentleman," he began at length, "which is now lying at 'is last garsp."

"Aye, aye," said the hog-driver, plodding on. "What's 'e garsping about? The disgrace of 'aving a cadger for a son?"

"No, gentleman," replied Mr. William Jupp, drawing

on facts. "Pewmonia is what's the matter with 'im. Got along of a chill," he added hastily.

"Pewmonia is on'y the crackjaw name the doctors give it," said the shaggy man, as he plodded sturdily ahead of Mr. Jupp. "A shortness of breath, that's what it really is. As for chill, why, I had it myself on'y two months back, and I never was warmer in my life. Couldn't 'ardly bear the bed-clothes on. If you're so anxious about your father, I don't see why you're worriting me. Go an' see after him; that'll give you something to do."

"I should on'y be too thankful, gentleman, if I could," said Mr. William Jupp, in a whining tone which did credit to his powers of mimicry. "But 'e lives in London, and unless I can git the railway fare to take me there from some kind benefactor, pore father may go off without 'is last wish being granted."

"What is 'is last wish?" asked the shaggily coated man curiously.

"To see my face again before 'e dies, gentleman," said Mr. William Jupp dramatically.

"I wonder at 'is taste," commented the surly pig-driver, "if it matches your voice in any way. Well, you won't git your fare from me. If it was your mother, now, I might say different."

"But it is me mother, gentleman," said Mr. Jupp with cheerful alacrity. "When I said father, it was her I was meaning all the time. I'm 'er eldest, gentleman, an' the pride of 'er loving 'art."

"It don't take much to make 'er proud, I reckon," commented the fastidious driver of the pig. "No, I've got nothing for you. A wife or a child, an' the case might 'ave tempted me to relieve you. I don't say it would, but it might."

"Bless you; kind gentleman, for those words," said the pliable Mr. Jupp rapturously. "My pore wife and two dear children are laying at death's door in the very same

place where mother is. All struck down at once, gentleman, by the same crool complaint."

"What did you call the name of it?" interrupted the man who drove the hog.

"Spiral meningaiters," said Mr. William Jupp, almost awed by the fecundity of his own invention.

"It's like the pride and wastefulness o' the idle pore to git themselves laid up with expensive complaints like that," said the shaggy man judicially, "and what I say is, it didn't ought to be encouraged. I'm sorry for you as a orphan, and a son, and a husband, and a father, but I should be going agin my own interests as a ratepayer if I give you what you've asked for, or half, or even a quarter of it. I should be doing you no good if I give you as much as a penny, and therefore I won't give you one. I——"

The pig, the man who drove it, and Mr. William Jupp had left the village with its single lamp-post behind them, and were now travelling between high quickset hedges over a road that would have been entirely dark but for the glimmering whiteness of the snow.

A more ideal scene for a robbery upon the person of an unsympathetic middle-aged man with, presumably, the price of a bacon-hog in his trousers pocket could hardly have been conceived. A frosty wind, acting as accomplice, blew the ends of the woollen muffler back over either shoulder of the driver of the pig. Mr. William Jupp had only to grasp them in either hand, and pull them violently apart, to interfere, in the profitable sense, with the respiration of the wearer. With his heart bounding in his throat, he did so.

"Ug-g'grr'h!" said the victim, lapsing heavily against Mr. Jupp, with a strangled crow of so suggestive a nature that the blood of his assailant froze in horror. "Leggo, you scoun—— Ug-g'grr'h!"

"I will when I get the price of that hog you've sold,"

said Mr. William Jupp, staggering under the weight of the sufferer. "I don't want to shed your blood, but I'm a desperate man, an' you'd better 'and over." He slightly slackened the woollen comforter. "Do you 'ear?"

"If I must, I must," said the victim hoarsely. "You've near scragged me as it is. 'I've two breast-pockets in this overcoat, an' the gold's in one of 'em, an' a fi'pun-note in the other. Put your 'ands over my shoulders, feel in both pockets, an' what you find, take."

Unable to repress a smile of triumph at the easy and rapid solution of an overwhelming financial difficulty, Mr. William Jupp let go the ends of the temporary woollen halter and obeyed. Instantly his wrists were seized in a rough and vice-like grip, and bending forward in spite of kicks and struggles, until the boots of his captive were raised several inches off the ground, the elderly man resumed his interrupted pilgrimage.

"Leggo!" said Mr. William Jupp angrily. Several attempts at kicking the calves of his captor's legs had failed, as had an effort to bite the back of his neck. With his mouth full of imitation fur cap and woollen comforter, he mumbled: "Can't you take a joke?"

"I've took a 'ighway robber," said the elderly man, as he doggedly progressed after the fashion of a short coal-heaver carrying a tall sack of coals. "And I'm going to keep 'im—leastways, till I've 'anded 'im over to the proper authorities. Then I shall go after my hog, an' if any 'arm 'as come to 'im, it'll be the worse for you." He gave a hitch to his burden and stepped out more rapidly.

"You're not a young man," argued Mr. Jupp considerably, an', strong as you think yourself, you may be doin' yourself a injury. Why, you're panting like a steam-engine this moment. Suppose you was to fall down dead in the road. What should I feel like? Whatever you may think, I 'ave a 'art——"

"An uncommon small one it must be," said the elderly

man grimly, as he paused for breath and then moved resolutely on again. "Don't you strain it on my account. We shall git to the police-station in another minute or so as it is, and if it was a hour's journey off, I'd take you there, as sure as my name is William Jupp. What did you say?"

As a matter of fact, Mr. William Jupp junior had uttered a hollow groan. That a shaggy man encountered by a wayfarer after dusk upon an unknown road should prove to be the father of the encounterer, may be regarded as a curious coincidence. Taking it into consideration that the child should have, previously to recognition, attempted to rob the parent, invests the coincidence with the buskins of tragedy. But that the son of the father thus outraged should have, only that morning, started upon a mission of filial duty to the sick-bed of his progenitor, throws over the occurrence a glamour of weirdness and mystery highly attractive to students of the occult. Like all men who go down to the sea in ships, as foremast hands, Mr. Jupp junior believed in ghosts. There had been a ghost on board his last ship, a phantom endued with materialistic powers so sufficient for the ejection of a slumbering fore-castle hand from the bunk originally occupied by the ghost when it was not one, that the sleeping-place could only be occupied by a brawny six-foot-high mariner named Bob Hicks, who found all the other bunks too short for the proper accommodation of his legs. And now the sudden conviction that the ghost of Mr. William Jupp senior, suddenly deceased, had his living descendant in its clutches, caused goose-flesh to develop all over the body of Mr. William Jupp junior and made his hair bristle underneath his cap. That the hog was the ghost of a hog seemed likely to faculties jumbled by previous libations of whisky, by over-excitement, exhaustion consequent on unaccustomed exertion, and the peculiar method

of transit by which he was being conveyed—whither?

Under the weltering confusion of his mind broke a hail from the middle road ahead.

"Jupp?" bellowed a large voice angrily, "is that you?"

"It is!" shouted the supposed ghost of Mr. Jupp senior, of whose fleshly reality his elder son began to be now convinced.

"It's too dark to see you," shouted the man of the bellow, "but I guessed who it must be comin' along. You went up the road while back wi' a couple of hogs, an' there's one in the station garden now, rootin' up Constabulary cabbages."

"Keep 'im till I come, Constable 'Opkins, will you?" shouted the elder Mr. Jupp cheerfully. "I'm bringin' something in your line, which accounts for my being a bit be'ind."

"A drunken tramp?" indifferently queried the constable, who now loomed out of the shadows ahead, leaning over a low gate in some whitish palings by the roadside and toying with a bull's-eye lantern.

"A 'ighway prig," panted the elder Jupp, as with a steaming forehead he stopped at the police-station gate and submitted his captive to the professional observation of the constable. "Tried to scrag me as cool as you please, just outside the village, which he'd followed me through, pitchin' a tale as full o' lies as a Christmas puddin' is o' plums. And he'd have done it, too, he would, if I 'adn't bin too quick an' sharp for 'im."

"Let's look at 'im," said the constable, bending over the gate and irradiating with a flood of blinding yellow light, smelling strongly of warm tin and hot oil, the reluctant features of Mr. Jupp junior. "Ugly-lookin' customer, too," he commented. "Well, bring 'im in, since you've brought 'im. I'll hold open the gate. 'Ere Dawlish!" he shouted, and a brilliant oblong patch of lamplight appeared in the dark part of the cottage police-

station, throwing into vivid relief the form of a younger constable. "We've another candidit for inside accommodation—a 'ighway robber took in the act. Look lively, will you?" he added, and as Mr. Jupp senior laboriously conveyed his speechless incubus up the slippery garden path and over the whitewashed threshold of the police-station, Constable Hopkins bolted the outer door behind him, and taking Mr. William Jupp by the collar, strongly facilitated the clattering descent of his boots upon passage bricks. "Come in 'ere," he then directed, and opening the door of a whitewashed kitchen sitting-room, turned in his charge, while Mr. Jupp the elder, straightening his back with difficulty, followed upon his heels.

The apartment in which the Expedition reluctantly found itself was furnished with simple economy, in addition to a varnished office desk, upon which a ledger reposed in the company of a pewter inkpot, containing three Windsor chairs, a square table covered with American cloth, and materials for a homely tea. The surprise of the elder constable was very great when, upon striding to the desk, opening the ledger, dipping the pen in the ink and turning round to bid the captor of the highway robber go ahead with the charge, he beheld him seated stiffly in a Windsor chair with fixed and bolting eyes and open mouth, staring blankly at the prisoner, while the zealous younger constable poured milk upon his head with a confused analogy between that liquid and the restorative which every pump is supposed to yield.

"'E's going to 'ave a fit or something," said Constable Dawlish in alarm. "Look at 'is eyes, the way they're bolting out of 'is 'ead. An' the way 'is jaw's fell down. Eppyleptic, that's 'is trouble. What was you saying, Mr. Jupp?"

"Pinch me!" besought Mr. Jupp, looking wildly at the constable. "It'll be a relief to wake up and know I've

bin dreaming. I'm nearly robbed an' murdered while driving home a hog on Christmas Eve, I master the villain single-'anded, give 'im over to the police, an' find 'e's my own son what I 'aven't set eyes on for three years."

"Per'aps you're mistaken," said Constable Hopkins pompously. "Per'aps there's something in the frosty air makes people see wrong about Christmas-time."

"I tell you the scoundrel pitched a tale a yard long about his poverty and his 'unger, and 'is sick father and wife and children what was crying out to see 'im on their death-beds," said Mr. Jupp, savagely glancing at the disconsolate figure of his eldest-begotten, "before 'e got hold o' this here comforter and tried to choke me with it."

"It was my lark," said Mr. William Jupp mendaciously. "I knowed you from the first minute I set eyes on you. And in my gladness and joy at finding you wasn't on a dying bed, as the postcard what Bessie got yesterday said you was, I played off a bit of gaff on you an' acted the giddy goat. There's the truth, an' if you don't believe it, I pity you!"

"I pity myself," said Mr. Jupp acidly, "for 'aving 'elped to make the world worse by one more blooming liar. As for this tale about a postcard, my wife posted one more than two months ago, or, what means the same thing, an' not wanting to leave me, me being down with pewmonia, she run out and give the postcard to the driver o' the Royal Mail, what runs reg'lar betwixt Crawlingford and London, to post for her."

"Then that's why the postcard wasn't delivered till yesterday," said Constable Hopkins. "Weedy, the man what has drove the Royal Mail for thirty year, is famous for 'is bad memory. Why, he had a kitten from my wife's sister at Ealing to bring down to me, and never remembered to deliver it, but kep' carryin' it backwards

and forwards until it was a full-grown cat, too big for the basket. Nobody blames Weedy; he drove the Royal Mail before the railway was put down, an' he expects to be superannuated in favour of a motor van every day, and pensioned off. He'll be missed, when he goes, by a lot of old-fangled folks what are used to his slow ways of hurrying an' prefer 'ossflesh to steam an' petrol."

"I see 'ow the muddle come about, then," said Mr. Jupp, coldly surveying his firstborn. "Well, you'd better git back 'ome again, William, things being as they are."

"I don't know as me and Dawlish can part with 'im so easy," said Constable Hopkins. "You've give 'im regularly in charge, and there ain't no witnesses to speak for him."

"Keep 'im as long as you like," said Mr. Jupp generously, rewinding his comforter in the act to depart, as Constable Hopkins looked at the whitewashed ceiling, and the discomfited Mr. William Jupp shuffled from one foot to another.

"You're a little hard on your family, though, ain't you?" observed Constable Dawlish in the ear of Mr. Jupp.

"Don't call 'em a family," said that gentleman with limpid candour. "It's a brood of 'ungry vultures, not to say hyenas and sharks, only waiting till I've drawn my last breath to try and pounce on my bit o' property. But if you'll let 'im go, Constable 'Opkins, I'll draw the line in favour of 'im so far as this. You come down here, Bill Jupp, not being asked, more for your own pleasure than for mine, an' you'll go back more for my pleasure than for yours. I'll pay your fare back to London, but you'll go by the Royal Mail."

"Why, it'll take the whole night long and 'arf of next day for the Mail to git 'im as far as 'The Westbourne Arms,' at Ealing, where Weedy puts up," protested Con-

stable Hopkins, "at 'is rate of going. However, please yourself."

"That's what I'm going to do," said the elder Jupp, his naturally forbidding countenance transformed by a beaming smile, as with a great deal of lumbering and creaking, a clumsy van-shaped vehicle, its glaring scarlet complexion showing fitfully in the light of two large side-lamps, and drawn by four shaggy, steaming horses, pulled up outside the gate.

"I'll take the passenger, to oblige 'ee, for two shillin'," said a quavering old man's voice replying to Constable Dawlish's appeal, out of the foggy darkness enveloping the box-seat.

"Eighteenpence is enough, Weedy," corrected Mr. Jupp, "and you 'ave no call to regard it as a passenger. It's a bit o' rubbidge I'm sendin' back to the place it came from. We're all wanted somewhere, if we only knowed it," he added, with subtle meaning, as the eighteenpence changed hands. Then Mr. William Jupp was summarily hoisted into the wooden shelved interior of the van, the octogenarian Weedy whipped up his smoking horses, and the Royal Mail, with its disappointed freight, lumbered heavily away into the frosty darkness.

"Yet blood's thicker than water," said Constable Dawlish.

"Depends on the kind o' water," said Mr. Jupp shortly, "and on the sort o' blood. Good-night!"

V

A SAILOR'S HOME

I

FOUR British mariners sat discontentedly enjoying the social advantages placed at their disposal by the committee of benevolent persons responsible for the establishment of a Sailor's Home at Winksea, a small seaport town which had done without one within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. Alfred Grimble, William Wimper, and another ordinary seaman, the origin of whose nickname of Biles was written prominently upon his features, were seated on a bench in front of an oilcloth-covered table, playing cards for halfpence with a gusto intensified by the minatory rule against gambling flaming on the opposite wall. Henry Mix, an aged and bibulous-looking A.B., was wedged in a Windsor chair before the fireplace, to which the poker, with icy mistrust, was attached by a chain. The room they sat in was an economically furnished apartment sandwiched off from the teetotal restaurant fronting on the street by a partition of match-boarding and glass. All four seamen were smoking short, black pipes, with haughty indifference to the "Please use me!" printed in large black letters on the staring white surface of the numerous crockery spittoons, and three out of the four were grumbling.

"It's wickedness, that's wot it is!" said Mr. Henry Mix, in a bitter tone.

"Sheer wickedness!" agreed Grumble.

"Sheer rank wickedness!" added Mr. Biles.

"It's the dis'onesty shown wot 'urts me!" said Mix, removing his pipe from his lips and rolling his eye round the neatly stencilled walls adorned with illuminated texts and prints of a patriotic and moral nature. "As I said to that stout female with the flyaway cap riggin' and the black silk aporn——"

"Meanin' the Matron?" hinted Wimper, a mild, fresh-coloured young seaman, who had created bitterness by winning six times running.

"As I says to the Matron," said Mix, "the C'mitty wot started this 'ere benevolent institootion lays themselves open to legal actions on the part of British sailormen wot 'ave bin took in."

"Wot!" ejaculated Grumble, with projecting eyeballs. "When they gives you free grub and free drink, and on'y charges for the beds? 'Ow does they take you in?"

"By hadvertising of this 'ere institootion as a Sailor's 'Ome, of course!" snarled Mr. Mix. "'Oo ever sor a sailor's 'ome—a real sailor's geniwine 'ome, 'owever 'umble—without a drop o' licker in it?"

Mr. Grumble and Mr. Biles rapped upon the table and cried "'Ear, 'ear!" Mr. Wimper cut the highest card in sarcastic silence and drew the bank again.

"That's wot I said to the Matron," pursued Mr. Mix, treating the mute appeal of the spittoons with profound disregard. "'I am a old man,' I say——"

"And she said: 'Then you're old enough to know better!'" chuckled Wimper.

"'Ow did you know that?" queried Mr. Mix sharply.

"'Cos I listened at the key'ole of 'er office," retorted the candid Mr. Wimper, indicating with a jerk of his

a glazed door inscribed "Private" in large black

"you 'ear me tell 'er as 'ow I was brought up on beer?" asked Mr. Mix.

"id," sniggered Mr. Wimper, "an' I 'eard 'er tell go and look at your nose in the glass an' see wot brought you down to!"

"ur, 'ear!" said the other ordinary seaman incau-

idn't quite ketch that remark o' yours, my lad,"

Mr. Mix glaring at the other ordinary seaman.

"idn't say anything," recanted the offender. "I orfed."

"at's the kind o' corf as gets people into trouble, n!" observed Mr. Mix, with dignity. "Don't let r it agen."

glazed door of the Matron's private room opening juncture shut up Mr. Wimper, who was prepar- cast more oil upon the troubled waters of Mr. dignity, and all four seamen rose respectfully as tron appeared, ushering in a plump, pretty young , attired in the most stylish and becoming of

"I please don't move!" cried the lady visitor. "You ked so comfortable!" she added, addressing Mr. whose Windsor chair adhered to his somewhat person as the shell of the perambulatory snail.

"is is Mrs. Honeyblow," explained the Matron, s one of the principal lady members of our Com-

Indeed, but for Mrs. Honeyblow I don't believe ea would have had a Sailor's Home at all."

"tainly not a teetotal one!" admitted Mrs. Honey-

"You remember how I battled in the cause of rance!" she added, turning to the Matron. "Sev- the committee held out for malt liquor at meals, onvinced them all how wrong and foolish it was."

Mr. Mix could not restrain a hollow groan.

"So that's what you have to thank me for, all of you," said Mrs. Honeyblow.

"We was a-thanking you afore you come in, mum," said the audacious Mr. Wimper smoothly. "Mr. Mix—'im as is wearin' the wooden bustle"—both ladies bit their lips, and Mr. Mix became a rich imperial purple—"Mr. Mix was wishing 'e could do somethink to show 'is gratitude when you come in!"

"How sweet of him!" said Mrs. Honeyblow gushingly, contemplating the saccharine Mix.

"Now you must all shake hands with me!" she added, quite in a flutter of patronage. "My dear husband was a sailor too. Perhaps some of you might even have sailed with him—Captain Honeyblow, of the schooner *Smiling Jane*. Oh! there never was a man like him—never!" Mrs. Honeyblow sank into a chair, and taking out a cambric handkerchief with a two-inch mourning border, prepared to cry.

"Come, come," said the Matron, respectfully patting her upon the shoulder. "You'll upset yourself, you know you will!"

"Oh, if you'd ever known him or even seen him, you wouldn't wonder at my fretting so!" gurgled Mrs. Honeyblow. "Oh! I can't believe he's really dead—I can't! He's sailing the wide ocean somewhere, alive and well, I feel he is. Why should he vanish like that? I made enquiries everywhere, I advertised, I offered fifty pounds—a hundred—to anybody who could help me to a clue"—the four seamen became genuinely interested—"but it was all no use, and so a year after he went—it's two years since I lost him—I had his will proved—poor dear, everything was left to me!—and went into weeds. And I shall have to wear 'em," sobbed Mrs. Honeyblow, "for six months more!"

"Cap'n 'Oneyblow, of the schooner *Smiling Jane*,"

ruminated Mr. Mix, whom the reference to a reward had stimulated to intellectual activity. "Vanished—two years ago. Wot sort o' man was 'e?"

"Oh, so good and noble! One of the best—husbands—that ever lived!" gurgled the widow.

"'Ad 'e murdered ennybody?" interrogated Mr. Mix.

"Murdered! He wouldn't have killed a fly!" sobbed Mrs. Honeyblow indignantly.

"But 'e might 'ave killed a sailorman. I've knowed skippers do that—and dror the line at flies," said Mr. Mix, with unconscious irony. "'Ad 'e robbed ennybody, lady?"

"How dare you insinuate such a thing!" exclaimed the widow, with flaming cheeks.

"I'm tryin' to account for 'is vanishing away, lady," said Mr. Mix patiently. "Per'aps 'e was a bit touched in the upper storey?" he suggested after a ruminating pause.

"Mad!" screamed Mrs. Honeyblow. "My Daniel! Mad! There never was a clearer-minded man!"

"Wot was 'e like, lady, in 'is looks?" pursued Mr. Mix, as Mrs. Honeyblow put away her handkerchief and stiffened visibly.

"A fine-looking, regular-featured man, with blue eyes, fair complexion, and auburn hair and beard," said the Matron.

"If you 'appened to 'ave a chart of 'im 'andy lady——?" insinuated Mr. Mix.

"I've a coloured photograph here," said the widow, opening a jet locket as large as the bowl of a soup-ladle. She detached it from the chain and diffidently placed it in the horny palm of the aged seaman.

"Short, stoutish, red-faced, carrotty 'air and beard," enumerated Mr. Mix, scanning the portrait with the eye of a connoisseur. "I've seen 'underds of men like that. 'Aven't you, Grimble?"

"Thousands," said Mr. Grimble, as his senior passed the locket round.

"Millions!" asseverated Mr. Biles.

"An' to think o' the money as might 'ave bin 'onestly earned by droppin' a runnin' noose round the neck o' any one of 'em an' towin' of 'im 'ome!" hinted Mr. Wimper ironically. "W'y, it's enough to make a man thirsty, ain't it?" He relieved Mr. Biles of the locket without ceremony, polished the glass upon his sleeve with an air that was palpably meant to be offensive, and perused the lineaments portrayed within with a retrospective air. "So that was Cap'n Honeyblow—Cap'n Daniel Honeyblow, of the *Smiling Jane*," he said at length. "I can't say I've seen millions of men just like 'im—nor thousands, nor yet 'undereds, but I knew one. He shipped as cook on the *Hope of Harwich* two years ago, for a v'yage to Port o' St. John's, Newfoun'land. We was carryin' sheet tin an' solder in boxes, an' the skipper meant to take a cargo of canned lobsters back. Queerly enough, this 'ere man, wot shipped as cook for the v'yage, was a Winksea man. Ben Bliss 'is name was; an' if the nose in this 'ere picture was redder, an' the beard an' 'air likewise, leavin' out the difference in clo'es, Cap'n Honeyblow and Ben Bliss might 'ave bin brothers."

"Don't mind 'im, lady," entreated Mr. Mix, as Mrs. Honeyblow wiped away the newly started tear. "'E's only talkin' for the sake o' sayin' somethin'. It's 'is ignorant way, that's all."

"Oh, but he speaks the truth, indeed he does," said Mrs. Honeyblow earnestly. "Ben Bliss was well known to me and Captain Honeyblow, and, indeed, to everyone in Winksea, and his likeness to my poor dear husband was really very strong. His mother did the washing for the Captain's family, the two boys were playfellows and friends, allowing for the difference in station, and I've

often and often heard my dear husband tell how he used to borrow Ben's clothes when he wanted to do anything he was sure to be whipped for. He had such a sense of humour!" Mrs. Honeyblow brought out the black-bordered handkerchief again. "And now they're both gone!" she whimpered, "both gone!"

"Both?" echoed Mr. Mix, with interrogative eyebrows.

"Ben Bliss 'e walked overboard in 'is stockin' feet on the eight day out," explained Mr. Wimper. "'E 'ad been drinkin' 'eavy since 'e come aboard, an' the cap'n 'ad 'urt 'is feelin's crool. Called 'im a dirty pig for sendin' up a biled fowl to the cabin table with the inside in an' the feathers on; an' Ben said as bein' called dirty by such a dirty man 'ad took away all 'is pleasure in life."

"So 'e made away with 'isself—for a little thing like that?" commented Mr. Mix incredulously.

"C'mitted soocide!" said Mr. Grumble, with a sniff of contempt.

"Not exactly," said the narrator. "'E finished all the rum without offerin' a drop to anybody, because he said it was p'ison; and then 'e took the only bit o' soap belongin' to the ship's comp'ny—it was a salt water patent kind, an' kep' in the fo'c'sle as a cur'osity—an' went overboard to 'ave a refreshin' wash, as 'e said."

"In the middle of the Atlantic! And couldn't somebody have stopped him?" cried Mrs. Honeyblow.

"'E 'ad the galley meat-chopper, besides the soap," said Mr. Wimper pithily; "the cap'n went 'arf mad over it."

"Over losin' him!" cried Mrs. Honeyblow.

"Over losing the chopper!" returned Mr. Wimper simply.

"His poor wife lives in Winksea still!" said Mrs. Honeyblow. "She used to be our parlourmaid at home before I married Captain Honeyblow, and when my husband was away on his last voyage but one, she got

married to Ben. Ben went away to sea a week before that dreadful day when the Captain disappeared, and three months later she got the news of his being drowned. She came to see me after she'd drawn her half-pay and clothes-money, looking so nice in her neat mourning. Said it was the first new dress Ben had ever bought her. She does the washing for the Home now, and is getting along quite comfortably. Here she is!" continued Mrs. Honeyblow, looking through the glass partition that separated the semi-private apartment in which she stood from the teetotal restaurant which occupied the ground-floor front, as a covered van stopped at the door, and a buxom, tidy young woman came through the shop, carrying one end of a bulky clothes-basket—the other moiety of which was supported by a broad-shouldered, middle-aged, somewhat sheepish-looking man. "Dear Mrs. Mudge, do ask her to step in here."

"She must," said the Matron. "We always go over the clean linen in my room, and three shirts were scorched to cinders only last week. Mrs. Bliss," she continued, as the swing-door was bumped open and the buxom young woman appeared, closely followed by the greater part of the clothes-basket, "you have come just as we were talking about you. This young man"—she affably indicated Mr. Wimper—"has some news of your poor husband, which you might like to hear."

Mrs. Bliss, before the conclusion of its sentence, had lost the best part of her colour. "It's not that he ain't dead, is it, ma'am?" she gasped entreatingly, letting go of her end of the basket and placing her hand upon her heart. "Oh, please, 'm, it's not that he's not dead?"

"No such good fortune, my poor Hannah," said Mrs. Honeyblow kindly. "This young man"—Mr. Wimper touched his brow—"was one of the crew of the *Hope of Harwich*, and saw poor Ben go overboard, that's all."

"Sor 'im sink?" interrogated the widow anxiously.

"Saw 'm sink," said Mr. Wimper, melted by the urgent appeal of Mrs. Bliss's eyes, "like a stone."

Mrs. Bliss wiped her face, to which the colour had returned, and breathed more freely. It appeared to Mr. Wimper, who was an observer, that the square middle-aged man who had followed the other end of the clothes-basket into the room breathed more freely also and perspired less.

"I shall never forget the last time I sor him!" Mr. Bliss's relict observed in a pleasant tone of retrospection. "'E come suddenly up from the 'arbour to tell me that a foreign-going barque named the *Hope of Harwich* wanted a cook, and that he'd shipped for the v'yage, and that I was to give 'is dog the fried steak 'e'd ordered for supper—a vicious, greedy thing it was—died sudden soon after poor Ben went. At the garden gate 'e stopped an' 'Give us a kiss, old gal!' he says. So I kuss 'im," said Mrs. Bliss, who in moments of emotion or excitement was wont to enrich her native verbs with new tenses, "an' 'e kuss me. Little did I think we kass for the last time."

All three women sighed, and Mr. Mix courted popularity to the extent of throwing in a groan.

"We were just speaking of the wonderful likeness between poor Ben and poor Captain Honeyblow, Hannah," explained Mrs. Honeyblow, reattaching the jet locket to her chain, "when you came in."

"It's wonderful!" said Mr. Wimper, whose easily-evoked admiration was now transferred from the lady to the laundress.

"You may well say so!" agreed Mrs. Bliss. "Before Mrs. Honeyblow married the Cap'n, when he came visiting at our 'ouse—me being then in service with Mrs. Honeyblow's ma as cook-general, and walking out with Ben—I couldn't 'ardly persuade myself, on coming suddenly into the parlour with the cloth an' catchin' the

couple courting, as wot Miss 'Arriet wasn't taking liberties with my young man!"

Mr. Wimper laughed uproariously, and suddenly desisted under the chilly discouragement of Mrs. Honeyblow's glance.

"An' what made the likeness more complete," pursued Mrs. Bliss, "was that Ben havin' tattooed a 'art and a 'H' on the back of 'is right 'and for 'Annah—him being a beautiful worker in that way—the Captain made 'im tattoo a 'H' and a 'art on 'is, 'Arriet an' 'Annah both beginnin' with the same letter. Ah, dear me! Well, well!"

Mrs. Honeyblow echoed the laundress's sigh, and the square man at the other end of the clothes-basket shuffled his feet in an embarrassed way.

"So you have found somebody to help you with the the basket, Mrs. Bliss?" said the Matron affably, including embarrassed square man in a gracious smile.

"It's Mr. Limbird, as lives next door," explained the laundress, with a perceptibly heightened colour. "Being a wharf-watchman, an' only on duty at night, he's free to lend me a friendly 'and in the day, and I don't know what I'd do without 'is kindness, especially when it comes to wringin' an' manglin'—I don't, indeed!"

"Mr. Limbird is a single man, I presume?" interrogated the Matron, perceptibly deepening the tint of Limbird's countenance as she fixed him with her glance.

"Widower!" explained Mr. Limbird, in a voice that apparently proceeded from the soles of his boots.

"Would you care to inspect the dormitories before you go?" inquired the Matron of Mrs. Honeyblow, after a slight and embarrassing pause, during which Mrs. Bliss fanned herself with the washing-book, and Mr. Limbird looked at nothing in particular with great attention.

"If you please," assented Mrs. Honeyblow.

But just then a knock came at the door; it opened, and

the brass-buttoned male functionary who discharged the duties of janitor and presided over the booking-office where the bed-tickets were sold, said to the Matron, touching his cap:

"Shipwrecked man and boy, 'm, just come in! Quite destitute without a rag o' dunnage or a halfpenny between 'em!"

"Oh! how interesting!" cried Mrs. Honeyblow, clasping her hands. "Do let me see them! Where are they?"

"They're at one o' the tables in the restyrong," said the janitor bitterly, "'aving cocoa and sausage-rolls."

"But we do not give food gratis unless beds have been paid for," said the Matron rebukingly; "and you tell me both the man and boy——"

"The boy give the order," said the injured janitor; "the cheeky little——" He hesitated a second and substituted "imp." "I don't know 'ow Miss Higgins come to serve 'em. Don't blame *me*!"

"Where are they sitting?" asked Mrs. Bliss, who was not free from the failing of her sex.

"Oh, where?" entreated Mrs. Honeyblow. "Do point them out, *please*!"

"You can see 'em plain 'ere," said the janitor, indicating the glazed partition. "It's the second table between this and the door. Not that they're much to look at. The boy is like every other boy, only dirtier and raggeder, and impudenter, and the man is a shortish, stoutish red-aired, red-bearded seaman 'bout forty years of age." He followed the Matron from the room, as Mrs. Honeyblow and Mrs. Bliss, impelled by a common impulse, ran to the partition, only to find the view into the shop obscured by the bodies of Mr. Wimper and his three fellow-mariners, who with countenances flattened against the glass were breathing it dim in the effort to concentrate their united observation on a common point of interest outside. Recalled to a sense of propriety by

the indignant pokes of the doorkeeper, the four seamen at length detached themselves, and, wheeling round, presented to the company four countenances deeply flushed with excitement, and eight circular and staring eyes.

"Don't you scream, lady, at wot I'm goin to tell you," warned Mr. Mix, fending off the closer approaches of Mrs. Honeyblow to the partition with affectionately extended arms. "An' wotever you do, remember I was the fust to reckernise 'im an' break the good noos——"

"If you've anything the matter with your 'art, mum," cautioned Mr. Wimper, addressing Mrs. Bliss, "don't you look through there too sudden. I've knowed parties paralysed before now through gettin' sudden shocks——"

"Oh, why? What do you mean?" panted both the widows.

"I mean," said Mr. Wimper, breaking it gently, "as your 'usband 'as come 'ome!"

Mrs. Honeyblow and Mrs. Bliss screamed in concert: "*What!*"

"Your 'usband, Cap'n 'Oneyblow, o' the *Smiling Jane*," said Mr. Mix doggedly.

"Your 'usband, Ben Bliss, late cook o' the '*Ope of Harwich*,'" asseverated Mr. Wimper firmly.

The open mouths of Mrs. Honeyblow and Mrs. Bliss gave forth no sound, but their circular eyes put the interrogation. "Where?"

"'E is now a-setting in the front shop," said Mr. Mix.

"The restyrong," corrected Mr. Wimper.

"With a ragged boy, 'aving cocoa and sossidge-rolls."

"They 'ave 'ad 'em," Mr. Wimper amended. "Look for yourself if you think I'm a liar!" He made way.

"She don't waste 'er time thinkin' that," sneered Mr. Mix, as both the panting, tearful women glued their agitated features against the glass partition. "She knows it! Look at 'er shakin' 'er 'ead."

"'Ear wot she's sayin'!" And indeed Mrs. Bliss

seemed to shrink from grasping at the suggested joy.

"It's not Ben come back; it ain't never!" she gasped, moistly clutching the trembling arm of Mrs. Honeyblow. "It's Cap'n 'Oneyblow, your 'usband, come back in disguise. I could swear to 'im anywhere!"

"Oh, no, no!" gurgled Mrs. Honeyblow. "It's Bliss. Nobody could mistake him! Nobody!"

The two women looked at each other's pale faces. The door opened and closed behind the retreating forms of the four seamen, who were unwilling to let a valuable opportunity slip.

"Oh, don't think I grudge you your happiness!" choked Mrs. Honeyblow. "There! The Matron's talking to him. She's bringing him this way. He's a stranger to her, of course, she being quite new to Winksea. Oh! in your place I should go wild with joy! Why don't you——" Her eyes, following the direction of Mrs. Bliss's, reverted to the stiff, upright figure of the square-headed Mr. Limbird, propped up with vacant gaze and open mouth, in a corner of the room. "What can be the reason you——"

Mrs. Honeyblow stopped suddenly, overwhelmed by the conviction that the reason was leaning against the wall. Her dazed glance swirled round to Mrs. Bliss, whose eyes were fastened on the door, and who, as footsteps sounded and stopped outside, sank slowly down upon the basket of newly washed clothes. The door-handle rattled and the door swung slowly back, admitting the scarecrow figures of the two mariners whose previous conversation we retail in the next chapter.

II

"Four sossidge-rolls an' two pints o' cocoa, an' look sharp about it!" ordered Tommy, swinging his legs over the verge of a rather tall chair. He was a small, meagre,

bright-eyed boy of twelve, economically clothed in the upper portion of an out-sized pair of seamen's trousers. Buttons and string coyly confined the garment round his neck, his lean and, I grieve to add, unwashed arms emerged from the flapped apertures originally communicating with the pockets, and the remains of a red woollen comforter tied about his waist, prudishly checked the straying tendencies of his sole garment.

"An' look sharp about it!" repeated Tommy.

"You know we haven't any money, don't you?" whispered the more aged and less confident of the two distressed mariners, bending over the table to reach his young companion's ear.

"O' course!" said Tommy, taking a huge circular bite out of the first sausage-roll. "An' so ort she, if she's a 'ead on 'er," he added, referring to the young person who had served them. "Didn't yer 'ear me tell 'er we was shipwrecked sailormen, an' 'ow can shipwrecked sailormen 'ave money?"

"That reminds me," said the stout, red-bearded mariner. "What did you tell the young woman we were shipwrecked for, you lying, young—rascal?"

"'Cos if I'd pitched 'er the truth, an' said we was two bloomin' stowaways wot 'ad worked our passage 'ome on the '*Alifax Lass* as ship's cook and extra boy, we'd 'ave got nothin'," said Tommy, with a contemptuous sniff, "except the chuck direct instead of 'avin' it by-an'-by. Why don't yer stow yer grub before they takes it away? Must I eat for yer as well as cadge?" The contempt of the youth's tone and expression must have stimulated the appetite as well as the courage of the stout, red-bearded seaman, for he fell ravenously upon the food, which rapidly vanished under their united exertions.

"Seems odd that brig what we stowed away aboard at '*Alifax* should 'ave bin bound 'ome to this port," re-

marked the boy, after an unbroken period of mastication.

"Why?" asked the red-bearded seaman, opening two very round, light blue eyes.

"'Cos yer don't know nothink about it," shrilled Tommy derisively. "Never was born 'ere, never was 'prenticed 'ere, never got married 'ere, never run away from yer wife and left 'er 'ere two years ago come next week. That's w'y!"

"Shut up, confound you!" pleaded the stout seaman, with an agonised glance round. "Somebody 'll hear."

"Yessir!" said Tommy with a fiendish obsequiousness.

"Don't call me 'sir,' snapped the red-haired seaman.

"Cap'n, then!" amended Tommy viciously.

"How many times must I tell you, you little demon," said the irritated seaman, "that my name's Ben Bliss, and that my rating is ship's cook?"

"Yer ain't no ship's cook," said Tommy with conviction, shaking his head. "I knowed that afore we'd bin two days aboard of the '*Alifax Lass*.'"

"What made you think it?" asked the other sourly.

"The cookin'," said the boy shortly. "'Sides which, yer told me yerself yer was a ship's cap'n in disguise."

"I must have been dreaming when I told you that," mumbled the other, looking hard at the opposite wall.

"Not a bit of it, my lad," said the boy derisively.

"Don't you call me your lad!" snapped the stout seaman.

"Nossir!" said Tommy respectfully.

"'Ben' you can call me, and if you want to be respectful, 'Mr. Bliss' 'll do," said the other. "And coming to names—what's yours?"

"Tommy," said Tommy.

"Tommy what?" continued the questioner.

"Tommy Nott," replied the questioned.

"And you ran away from your mother's shop at Deptford because——"

"'Cos my last new farver whopped me!" said Tommy. "I told yer that before. After I saved yer life, I did!"

"Saved my life!" said the stout seaman with wounding incredulity; "a measly little shaver like you, that had been loafing about the quays for weeks and living on kicks and potato-peels!"

"I was doin' the same as yerself, if it comes to that," sniffed the boy defiantly.

"Living on kicks and potato-peels?" asked the stout seaman with ominous distinctness, while his right hand rose and hovered fondly in the vicinity of the boy's ear.

"Lookin' for a ship," amended Tommy, leaning delicately aside, "an' gettin' warned off by cap'ns an' mates. 'An' stewards an' carpenters," he added after a pause, "'cos I'd left my dress clo'es be'ind where I come from, an' they said they didn't want no sich scarecrows aboard."

"Did I get warned off?" pressed the stout seaman in an unpleasant tone. "Did I? Did they call me a scarecrow? Think a bit, if you can't remember."

The eyes of Tommy Nott made a rapid inventory of the stout seaman's wardrobe, which comprised a scarlet guernsey trimmed with tar and lamp-oil, an old and highly polished pair of railway porter's corduroy trousers, a Glengarry cap with one tail, and the uppers of a pair of American rubber boots.

"It was worse than that," said Tommy simply. "They didn't call *me* a bloomin' Salvation slush-bucketer. Nor——"

"You've got a good memory, haven't you, my boy?" said the stout seaman, trying to smile. "You heard me explain to those rude, uncivil men how I came to lack the necessities of life. You heard——"

"No, I didn't," said Tommy firmly. "They never waited to 'ear. An' that's 'ow yer come to miss the gang-way an' slip between the ship's side an' the basin, an' 'ow I come to save yer life."

The stout seaman snorted indignantly.

"I dived after yer!" asserted Tommy.

"Fell after me, you mean!" said his elder.

"An' pulled yer out," said Tommy.

"Pulled me under," contradicted the stout seaman.

"An' afterwards, when yer'd finished the bottle o' whisky the quay-officer give yer to stop us from takin' cold——" continued Tommy.

"Whisky's poison to young boys," stated the other hastily. "It would have been inhumane to let you drink any."

"Yer told me as 'ow I'd saved the life of the cap'n of a merchanter in disguise, an' I should never want while I lived."

"S'sh! You see what bad whisky it must have been to make me talk such a lot of rubbish," said the red-bearded seaman, breaking out into a perspiration. "And how many times must I tell you not to talk so loud? What do you think would happen if anybody heard you?"

"I should find out whether it was the truth or the whisky," said Tommy. "But it's the truth. I've seed yer wife!"

"*What?*" gasped the stout seaman, undergoing a lobster-like change of hue.

"I sor yer wife last night," said Tommy, fixing his eyes upon the scarlet countenance of the middle-aged seaman, "an' yer sor her, too. It was when yer lost me an' went for a walk by yerself in the dark."

"Did I?" said the other blankly.

"Not by yerself," said Tommy, "'cos I come, too. She—yer wife, I mean—lives in a nice house and garden 'bout a mile outside the town. I sor yer sneak in at the gate 'thout ringin' the bell, an' peep in through a crack o' the parler winder-blind. I 'ad a peep myself afore I come away, an' I'm s'prised at yer."

"Why?" muttered his abashed companion.

"Leavin' sich a nice young woman all alone by herself," said Tommy with severity. "She 'ad a black dress on, an' a white thing on her 'ead."

'Widow's cap," said the stout man shortly.

"An' I sor 'er weddin'-ring shine when she put 'er 'an'kerchief up to 'er eyes."

"Crying?" jerked out the other, turning purple.

"Larfin'," said Tommy. "She 'ad one o' them funny picture papers readin', an' she larfed over somethin' in it till she cried."

"You see what women are," said the other, after a misogynistical pause. "Don't you ever marry one of 'em, my boy, if you don't want to spoil your life. Look at me!"

"I did, when we got out o' the lanes to where the lamp-posts was," said Tommy, "an' I couldn't think 'ow she could."

"Could what?" snapped his companion.

"Look at yer," said Tommy with candour, "if wot yer said at 'Alifax was true."

"Don't you be impudent," said the stout seaman, in a choking voice; "I've warned you before."

"All right, my fine feller," said Tommy cheerfully, scraping the sugar and cocoa-grounds from the bottom of his cup.

"Don't call me your fine fellow!" said the other, clenching his fist.

"Ave, aye, sir!" said Tommy smartly.

"I'll tell you why I walked out to Mrs. Honeyblow's house last night," pursued the other, after a brief moment devoted to rapid mental labour. "I used to know her husband and her too, before I—before he disappeared. This is my native place, and when I was a boy, the Captain was one too, and we played about together. When he was 'prenticed to the Merchant Service, his father got me a berth on the same vessel, the *Quick Passage* she was,

trading to the Bermudas. I sailed with him when he was mate of the *Fancy Free*, an' when he got his master's certificate. When he got married to that young woman I peeped at through the window, I was"—the speaker gulped—"I was there——"

"An' when he caught another bloke kissin' 'er in the garden when he came 'ome from givin' evidence before the Board o' Trade, 'bout 'is runnin' down a trawler—an' made up 'is mind to go away on the quiet like Enoch Ardin—or whatever you said 'is name was—was yer with 'im then?" Tommy demanded.

"Yes, I was," asserted the other, and Tommy seemed shaken for the first time. But he rallied enough to ask:

"Then why didn't yer knock at the door last night an' tell her where her 'usband is?"

"Because I took my oath to him I'd never betray him," the stout mariner said, with a breath of relief, "and he knew Ben Bliss would keep his word! Besides, the shock of seeing me might have killed her."

"Wot?" ejaculated Tommy.

"Or driven her mad!" asserted the other comfortably.

"Yer ain't over-'an'some to look at," said Tommy, with critical regard, "but I've seen a uglier face than wot yours is. Remember that Finn—him with the——"

"Because I'm the breathing image of her husband, Captain Honeyblow," said the other hastily, "that's why it would upset her to see me. We were as like as twins—everybody noticed it. And now that he's dead and gone——"

"Dead, is he?" said Tommy. "Yer never told me that afore."

"He went away to die when he found out that his newly married wife didn't care for him," said the stout seaman, wiping away a furtive tear.

"Ah, but did 'e?" said Tommy acutely.

"He did," said the alleged Mr. Bliss; "soon after—died

of a broken heart in a lonely spot at the—the North Pole, without a living creature near him to tell the tale.”

“Then ’ow is it yer can tell it?” interrogated the young cross-examiner.

“Because his ghost appeared to me,” returned the other “and revealed the secret. Nobody but me knows, or ever will know, where he lies.”

“Then why don’t yer up and pretend to be him?” said Tommy eagerly. “You might ’a’ knocked at the door last night an’ said so. If yer as like Cap’n ’Oneyblow as wot yer say yer are, Mrs. ’Oneyblow ’ud ’ave believed yer. Where’s yer ’ead gone to, that yer didn’t think of it before?”

“Why, you—you wicked little scamp!” said the stout seaman, with deep feeling. “Do you suppose I’d stoop to a deception like that? Pretend to be another man—and tell falsehood upon falsehood? If ever you got any education, you’re a disgrace to it.”

But Tommy had slipped down from his tall chair. “Come on! I’ll stand by yer an’ see yer through,” he said protectingly. “As for ’er—Mrs. ’Oneyblow—dyin’ or goin’ mad, wimmen don’t die so easy, an’ she must ’ave bin mad, anyway, to marry a man like——”

“Like——?” said the stout seaman, flushing angrily. “Go on; let’s hear. Like——”

“Like ’im,” said Tommy guardedly. “Come on, let’s go an’ break the good news.”

“You’re a boy, and don’t know what you’re talking about,” said the other loftily. “Let’s get out of this! There’s people been staring at you and me for minutes past over the ground glass of that partition bottom of the shop there. As for what you suggest, it’s felony—punishable with imprisonment for life if I were found out. You don’t think what a thing it would be for me——”

“An’ yer don’t think wot a thing it would be for me,” said Tommy in a hoarse whisper of swelling injury, “to

'ave saved the life of a real skipper with a master's certificate, 'stead of a common, ordinary ship's cook like yer. Wot do yer mean by such selfishness? Why, it 'ud make me fortune. Over and over ag'in, it would. I'm s'prised at yer, I am. Wot's wrong, now?"

For the stout seaman, after stealing a second hurried glance at the glass partition, had turned very pale and risen to his feet.

"Come away—I can't stand the smell of food in here!" he said breathlessly, grasping his young companion firmly by a portion of his only garment, and beginning to pick his way amongst the little tables in the direction of the street. But even as he reached the glass swing-doors, the portal was blocked up by the bodies of four seamen, who had passed on their way out a moment previously. Now they formed a living barrier between the fugitive and freedom, and on the face of every man sat a pleased, expectant smile.

"'Ow are you, matey?" inquired Mr. Wimper, to whom one of the faces belonged. "Goin' to cut an' run an' leave all your ole pals be'ind you, was you?" He smote the stout seaman powerfully upon one shoulder. "'Eave to an' let's 'ave a yarn!" he said.

"Stow that, William," said Mr. Mix rebukingly. "If you don't know respect to your superiors, you must be learned it. A cap'n's a cap'n, wotever 'e 'as on—or off," added Mr. Mix, correcting himself.

"I don't know what you're talking about, either of you," said the alleged Mr. Bliss, with pale face and twitching lips. "This boy and me made the voyage from Halifax as stowaways—and we've struck hard times here, as well as on the other side. Being destitute and starving—not a penny to bless ourselves with, we came in here and ordered food.

"An' nat'rally enough," said Mr. Wimper, "when you've 'ad your blow out, you slips your cable. But you're

leavin' more than a little bill be'ind, though you don't know it!"

"William!" said Mr. Mix warningly.

"Upon my soul, I don't know what you're talking about!" said the stout seaman fervently.

"'E don't know 'isself, sir!" said Mr. Mix with respectful warmth.

"It's no good your sir-ring me," said the unhappy stout seaman doggedly. "My name's Ben Bliss, and my ratin'g's ship's cook. Consequently——"

"Consequently you never sailed with me aboard the '*Ope of 'Arwich?*'" put in the irrepressible Mr. Wimper. "Consequently you never got boozed an' kept it up? Consequently you never sent the ole man up a biled fowl with the feathers on an' the inside——"

"Upon my oath, I never did," said the agitated stout seaman.

"O' course not, Cap'n 'Oneyblow, sir!" said Mr. Mix warmly.

"O' course not, sir!" chorused Mr. Mix's two supporters.

"Why do you call me Captain Honeybird, or 'blow,' or whatever the name is?" demanded the stout seaman, "when I tell you my name's Bliss?"

"'Cos they've got it into their fat 'eads," explained Mr. Wimper, with graceful familiarity, "as there's a bit o' boodle to be made out of provin' you to be the other bloke, matey. But me an' you knows better, don't us? 'An' so does somebody else in there!" Mr. Wimper's jerked thumb indicated the glazed partition. "Come along an' see 'er." He took the arm of the stout seaman with a wink suggesting sympathy with the softer emotions. But the frenzied stout seaman shook him off.

"I don't know what you mean, or who you're talking about. You've been drinking, my man, that's what

you've been. Let me pass, and I'll overlook it this time!"

Far from being wounded by the personality, Mr. Wimper grinned from ear to ear. "Ain't 'e a daisy?" he chuckled. "Ain't 'e a fair treat! Been drinkin'! Good ole Benny wot got overboard to wash 'is socks in the middle of the Atlantic!" He wiped his brimming eyes upon his sleeve. "'E'll overlook it this time!" he gasped. "Overlook it!"

"I'm ashamed o' you, William Wimper," said Mr. Mix severely. Stimulated by this sympathy, his victim made an effort to pass, instantly foiled by the saline veteran. "No, sir," he said, solemnly elevating an expostulating palm. "Excuse me, Cap'n, but not if I know it!"

"I've told you we've got no money!" said the flushed and desperate stout seaman, looking anxiously over his shoulder. "Let me and the boy get a fair start before the attention of the manager is attracted—and—and I'll do as much for you another time."

"Beggin' your pardon, Cap'n," apologised Mr. Mix, "it can't be done. No ways, it can't."

"My belief is you're *all* intoxicated," said the person addressed, savagely. Mr. Mix rolled a bleary eye ceiling-wards in pious horror, and Mr. Wimper was seized with a fresh paroxysm of mirth.

"Stow it! Stow it, Benny, ole man," he panted, "or I shall bust somethin'. An' don't be in a 'urry to leave us, Benny, because you've a friend 'ere willin' to pay for the grub, an' more if you want it. If you arsk 'oo, it's your wife!"

"My——" The stout seaman controlled a start and turned it into a shake of the head. "Ben Bliss wasn't a married man," he said decidedly. "That is—he isn't. None of your silly jokes with me!"

"That's right, sir," said Mr. Mix patronisingly, as Mr. Wimper wilted momentarily under the stern glance of the

stout seaman's eye. "Don't put up with his familiarity. It's your own dear good lady as is a-waiting for you in there. Mrs. Captain Daniel 'Oneyblow as——"

"What?" gasped the stout seaman, turning white.

"As 's mourned you as lost," said Mr. Mix, "up'ards of two years."

"I thought 'im lost myself," said Mr. Wimper, who had recovered. "Didn't I see 'im go? But 'e was too full o' whisky to leave room for salt water, an' 'ere 'e is as frisky as ever, pretendin' to be a bachelor bloke just for the fun o' the thing!" He grasped the arm of the disputed article of salvage as Mr. Mix shot forth a horny claw and possessed himself of the right one. "But stow larks, Benny, or your missus 'll be gettin' impatient. Come along, come along and see 'er!"

"Come along an' see 'er, Cap'n," said Mr. Mix. "O won't it be a 'appy meetin' when you an' she——"

"Is this who you mean?" said the captive with a creditably simulated air of vacancy, as a stout, middle-aged woman in a cap approached, followed by an official of the establishment.

"No, an' you know it," said Mr. Wimper shortly.

"It's the Matron, sir," explained Mr. Mix. "Bring the boy along, you chaps be'ind. I've found 'im, mum; I've found the missin' 'usband of that dear lady in there. Won't she bless old Mix for this——"

"When she sees 'e's got 'old of the wrong man!" sneered Wimper. "Don't you 'ang back, Benny; shyness ain't like you."

Holding the stout stranger in the powerful grasp necessitated by his shrinking desire for anonymity, he opened the door of the glass-partitioned room. Two feminine shrieks, uttered simultaneously in different keys, greeted the involuntary entrance of the stout seaman.

"It's Bliss—Ben Bliss, your husband! Yes, Hannah, it is—it is!" cried Mrs. Honeyblow.

"Oh no, 'm, no! It's Cap'n 'Oneyblow come back to you again!" screamed Mrs. Bliss.

The stout seaman, at the first shrill note of Mrs. Honeyblow's scream, had given a galvanic start. Framing a rapid resolution in the desperate state of things, he let his red beard drop upon his chest and stared from one tearful countenance to the other with a really creditable assumption of vacancy.

"My Daniel—that! Never!" gasped Mrs. Honeyblow. "It's your own husband, Bliss. He—oh, can it be that he doesn't recognise you, Hannah?"

"Oh, Cap'n Honeyblow, sir, don't you know your own dear wife? Look at 'er again," sobbed Mrs. Bliss. "Oh, do—do look at 'er again!"

A ray of meaning came into the dull eyes of the red-bearded seaman. "I don't know her," he said stolidly, carefully averting his glance from the pretty features surmounted by the widow's bonnet. "And I don't know you. Your faces are familiar to me—I mean quite strange. You must be mistaking me for somebody else, my—my good woman."

The gifted artist swept the cold dew from his forehead with a right hand that trembled visibly.

"With her initial tattooed on your hand!" exclaimed Mrs. Honeyblow, pointing to the guilty member. "'H' for Hannah."

"Oh, please, Miss 'Arriet, ma'am, I mean," cried Mrs. Bliss, "the Captain 'ad the same. My poor Ben borrowed a carpet-needle from me to do the prickin' with. He——"

"Yes, didn't you?" said Mrs. Honeyblow, smiling soothingly on the red-bearded man, who felt the blood rush dizzily to his brain.

"Tommy," he said in a strangled voice.

"'Ere," said Tommy guardedly.

"Tell these ladies that I've lost my memory," appealed the disputed property.

"Ever since the day I dove overboard and saved yer life, yer 'ave," responded Tommy promptly.

"Dived!" echoed the stout seaman angrily.

"Dove," said Tommy, shrilly, "an' killed that shark wot nearly bit yer legs orf. The Cap'n said it was the most gallantest haction 'er ever sor."

"There wasn't any shark there!" shouted the red-bearded, stout seaman, "or any captain, either; and you're a little liar!"

"Yer forget yer've lost yer memory," said Tommy promptly. "There was three of us there, just as I've said—me an' the shark, an' Ben Bliss, an' Cap'n Honeyblow."

"Captain Honeyblow!" exclaimed that officer's relict, seizing the boy by the sleeve. "Was *he* there?"

Tommy nodded portentously. The stout seaman stared at him with bolting eyes. Four seamen guarded the door. The situation hung upon the lips of one small, unwashed boy, dressed in the moiety of a pair of adult mariner's trousers.

"He was there?" cried Mrs. Honeyblow. "Then where is he now?"

"There," said Tommy, pointing a stubby, black finger adorned with a half-eaten nail at the hapless stout seaman. Before Mrs. Honeyblow had time to emit another sentence—"An' Ben Bliss is there, too," said Tommy. "Ever since 'e lost 'is memory 'e don't know which 'e is. My belief——"

"But before he had the shock——" faltered Mrs. Honeyblow, holding on to the equally agitated Mrs. Bliss. "Before you saved his life——"

"Which was 'e then? Tell us, there's a dear!" entreated Mrs. Bliss. But Tommy shook his head.

"I dunno," he said simply. "I never seed 'im till I sor 'im in the water, swimmin' for 'is life, with the shark goin' to bite 'is 'ead orf. An' I dove overboard—

off a vessel boun' for—for Colarado—an' killed the shark—an' saved 'im."

"I wish that shark 'ad 'ad a bit more sense," said Mr. Mix savagely from behind. "I wish——"

But Mrs. Honeyblow and Mrs. Bliss were straining their vision as they gazed at the maritime mystery before them. The mystery had taken refuge in stolid silence.

"Oh, try, try to remember," urged Mrs. Honeyblow, "that your name is Bliss! Isn't it, my poor fellow?"

"Think a bit, Cap'n 'Oneyblow, do, sir, an' it'll all come back to you," besought Mrs. Bliss.

But under the interrogatory gaze of eager eyes the stout, red-bearded seaman remained silent and inscrutable.

III

Mrs. Bliss resided in Paradise Row, a street situated in the rural suburbs of Winksea. The gooseberry bushes in the little front garden bore a fine crop of drying linen, and heavily laden lines bearing garments of both sexes traversed the path, at a height calculated not to miss the hat of a visitor.

"But I've got no 'eart for ironing," said Mrs. Bliss, as she sprinkled a basket of shirts with starch and water. "Wot woman could 'ave, with this 'anging over 'er?"

Mr. Limbird grunted an assenting negative and turned the mangle savagely.

"It's the crool uncertainty wot's so trying," said Mrs. Bliss. "But there! For days and nights I've knowed somethink 'orrible was goin' to 'appen. Now it's 'oppen."

"Well, you're satisfied, ain't you?" growled Mr. Limbird.

"Before we set out yesterday with the van," went on Mrs. Bliss, "you must 'ave noticed I wasn't myself?"

"I did!" said Mr. Limbird.

"Wot did I do that struck you as unusual, Jim?" asked the prophetess, slightly flattered.

Mr. Limbird ceased to mangle, and rested his chin on the handle of the machine, an attitude favourable to reflection. "You cleaned the kitchen," he said, "and you smacked the baby."

"I smuck 'er, the blessed innercent!" said Mrs. Bliss, lifting the personage in question out of the cradle and atoning by a hug, "because she would keep on a-pointing to that fortygraph of pore Ben wot hangs by the dresser an' calling it Da!"

"She'll be able to p'int to something solider than a fortygraph before long," observed Mr. Limbird, with whom mental suffering took the not infrequent form of surliness. But he repented as Mrs. Bliss hastily put back the baby in the cradle, dropped into a chair, and began to cry. "I didn't mean to 'urt you by the 'int, 'Annah," he said, swallowing something that stuck in his own throat, "but if we've got to face it, we 'ave. This ain't Cap'n 'Oneyblow what 'as come back with 'is 'ead screwed on the wrong way, an' thinks 'arf the time 'e's Benjamin Bliss; it's Benjamin Bliss what supposes 'e's Cap'n 'Oneyblow, an' you an' me are a-setting on a light-ed powder-barrel, so to speak, waiting to be blowed apart for ever. That's 'ow I look at it." He wiped his heated brow with a red handkerchief, and after an instant's silent struggle mopped his eyes also.

"To co-come back," Mrs. Bliss wailed, "like this! After two years! Not drowned, as the cap'n of the '*Ope of 'Arwich* said 'e was, but *alive* an'——" The rest of the sentence was smothered in apron.

"He'll miss a old thing or so," said Mr. Limbird. His glance strayed eloquently in the direction of the cradle, whose occupant was placidly sucking a plug of india-rubber. "An' he'll find one or two new 'uns. What came o' that grandfather's clock 'e used to be so proud of?"

"I sold it to Mr. 'Arris, the broker in Ropewalk Street, a month after you an' me got married by the Registrar on the quiet," sobbed Mrs. Bliss. "'E gave me thirty shillin's in cash an' a new double-bedded bolster."

"'Cos the old one was all lumps. I know," assented Mr. Limbird.

"That was with me cryin' so much o' nights when Ben was away at sea," sniffed Mrs. Bliss.

"For fear 'e wouldn't come 'ome?" hinted Mr. Limbird jealously.

"For fear 'e would," said Mrs. Bliss simply.

"An' now 'e 'as," said the distracted Mr. Limbird, "just as you an' me was makin' up our minds to let the neighbours into our little secret an' 'ave a weddin'-breakfast an' a christenin'-party all in one."

"My belief is they don't want no lettin' in," responded Mrs. Bliss, as she dried her eyes. "Mrs. Gedge she guessed long ago, if you ast me; and Mrs. Maw an' 'er sister guss before 'er. Mr. 'Arris goss when I swapped the clock, for 'e winked at me, an' wonk at 'is shopman, an'——"

"There's a knock at the door," signalled Mr Limbird.

Mrs. Bliss caught up the cradle, occupant and all, and stuffed it into his arms, and the wharf-watchman, opening a door artfully papered over and communicating with his own bachelor dwelling, noiselessly vanished, as, with her hand upon her heart, Mrs. Bliss economically opened the door, an inch at a time.

"It's Mrs. Honeyblow," said the voice of that lady. "Don't look so frightened, Hannah!"

Mrs. Bliss promptly altered her expression as her glance fell upon her visitor's attire.

"You've—you've gone out of weeds, 'm!" she cried joyfully.

"Into half-mourning," corrected Mrs. Honeyblow, "because, since yesterday morning, I'm only half certain

that I'm a widow. It's about that I've come. We're going to send—*him*—down here from the Home this afternoon."

Mrs. Bliss became rigid with apprehension, and Mr. Limbird, listening behind the paper-covered door, clenched his fists in an access of jealous fury.

"For a little while, under charge of some kindly sailors," said Mrs. Honeyblow, "in the hope that his weary brain may be refreshed by the sight of familiar objects."

"If you mean me, 'm——" began Mrs. Bliss, with rising emotion.

"His memory might come back, quite suddenly, the Doctor says. Oh! think what it would mean to have your husband back again!" said Mrs. Honeyblow.

"That's just what I do think!" said Mrs. Bliss, with a shiver. "I've thunk of nothing else since yesterday!"

"You must have been so lonely, Hannah!" cried Mrs. Honeyblow.

Mrs. Bliss looked down and pleaded her apron.

"Without a man's voice and a man's step a house does seem so empty," pursued Mrs. Honeyblow, with a sigh. "I know what it is, and I can feel for you. And for this poor wanderer too!"

"Then why don't you let the kindly sailors take 'im out to your 'ouse and refresh 'is weary brain with the familiar objects there?" said the laundress, reddening indignantly. "His memory might come back suddenly, an' think wot it would mean to 'ave *your* own dear 'usband back again!"

The ladies exchanged a look of indecipherable meaning.

"I do, I do; but to wish to be happy at your expense would be so selfish, Hannah!" said Mrs. Honeyblow angelically. "You don't think I grudge you the joy of reunion with——"

"Miss 'Arriet," said Mrs. Bliss, nerving herself for the

gle. "I won't 'ave 'im! I've said I won't, an' I . 'E don't belong to me. If you must 'ave it, I'm suited. Me and Mr. Limbird next door got joined e the Registrar a year back, an' to make a clean : of it," added the desperate woman as an infantile pierced the paper-covered door of communication the next house, "there's the the baby cryin' now." h!" exclaimed Mrs. Honeyblow in shocked accents, dreadful! What a revelation!—how imprudent ave been! What—oh! what do you intend to do?" ick out as Ben's dead an' I'm a widder until 'e s beyond doubt as 'e's alive an' I ain't one!" said Bliss with great firmness.

it, Hannah, my poor, dear Hannah!" began Mrs. yblow.

axin's no use, Miss 'Arriet!" said the laundress. ou was to sit on that rush-bottomed cheer from tmas to Barnaby, persuadin' me, I'd never be cux erswodd into takin' a 'usband wot isn't mine. r!"

ayvo!" said the listening Mr. Limbird.

'ard on Doctor Venables to 'ave a blight fall on 'is ng 'opes," pursued the eloquent laundress, "but 'e got to be blote, if it depends on me!"

don't understand you, Hannah!" said Mrs. Honey- icily, but with a complexion considerably warmed. gave emphasis to the declaration by immediately g: "Have people been talking? Oh! what busy- s! *What* are they saying?"

nly that the Doctor 'ave become very fond of calling e Vineyard!" returned Mrs. Bliss.

e Vineyard was Mrs. Honeyblow's suburban villa, Mrs. Honeyblow was tinglingly conscious that her a had, during the last twelve months, required a deal of professional attendance.

e has certainly called at The Vineyard very regu-

larly," she owned. "But he is very shy and very reserved, and has said nothing definite to me, and I have said nothing definite to him. And at this moment of dreadful uncertainty——" Her rounded chin quivered, and large tears rose in her effective eyes. Mrs. Bliss slid from her chair and knelt beside her.

"Don't be uncertain, Miss 'Arriet," she implored. "Make up your mind it's the Captain! The Captain, come back like a repentant prodigy, longin' to be folded to your 'art of 'arts. Say it over an' over till the good news seems true, like I done when I see in the *Weekly Gazette* as my Ben were drowned at sea!"

Mrs. Honeyblow was visibly shaken by this impassioned appeal. "Hannah, Hannah, my good girl," she panted, "if I only—if I could really—if it were as you say! But Daniel must be dead! He must have been kidnapped—oh! I've thought it all out!—murdered in London by the owners of that smack who brought the action."

"They won it," said Mrs. Bliss; "an' as for revenge, they 'ad it out of 'im in chaff in Court. Not but wot that might 'a' preyed upon 'is feelings, bein' made a laughin'-stock of!"

"He never could see a joke—any more than he could leave off being jealous if another man looked at me!" sighed Mrs. Honeyblow. Mrs. Bliss suddenly clutched her arm.

"Miss 'Arriet—if I never breathe my lips again," said Mrs. Bliss with dramatic fervour, "I've got to say it now. It was jealousy druv the Cap'n to vanish like that, just as 'e stood, in a suit o' Navy serge, with two pound ten in 'is pocket. Don't speak, ma'am; wait a minute! Twenty times the words 'as bin on the tip o' my tongue. But I've check 'em, an' chock 'em, an' chuck 'em—though I knew they was bound to out. You remember that June day Cap'n 'Oneyblow vunish—I was up at The

Vineyard 'elpin' your two girls with a late spring-clean?"

"Yes—yes!" gurgled Mrs. Honeyblow. Oh, *please* be quick!"

"You 'ad on a new——"

"Gown—yes, I know, white trimmed with lilac."

"An' the Doctor dropped in, quite late, to afternoon tea."

"We had it on the lawn, under the trees, the weather was so beautifully warm. Go on!"

"I was in the little breakfast-parlour, lookin' on the lawn, washin' the venetian blinds. Sudden, I heard a screech—sudden, I did—an' peeped through the slats," said Mrs. Bliss earnestly, "the blinds bein'——"

"Yes, yes," cried Mrs. Honeyblow.

"I pope through——"

"You've said that!"

"I pup, an' what do you think I sor?"

"How can I tell?"

"I sor you runnin' round an' round the lawn, giving little playful shrieks like——"

"Oh!"

"An' the Doctor chasin' you, with 'is black coat-tails flyin' on the breeze," said Mrs. Bliss, emphatically. "'E chuss you till 'e caught you, quite frisky like, an' then——"

"I know—I—oh, Hannah; what must you have——"

"I sor 'im catch you from behind, round the neck, in a very ticklin', playful way. An' that very moment I 'eard 'eavy steps, like the Captain's, go down the little avenue be'ind the 'igh 'olly 'edge, an' the garden gate shut. An' the Captain never come 'ome that night, nor after. The 'orrid truth must 'a' flashed on him like lightnin' and froze 'is blood," said Mrs. Bliss.

"And you believe that when you——"

"Pap through them blinds——"

"You saw me and Doctor Venables kissing—kissing!"

"Not azackly kissin.' Playful in a Bank 'Oliday kind of way I shouldn't 'a' expected," said Mrs. Bliss candidly.

"Then you wronged us both wickedly!" declared Mrs. Honeyblow with spirit. "The Doctor did run after me, and I screamed, but only because a cockchafer had got into my hair. One of those horrid, leggy things with sticky wings and fat bodies. Oh, Hannah! and you believe that——"

"When I pip at you both, the Cap'n was a-popping too," Mrs. Bliss nodded.

"And—that—was—what drove him—away?"

Mrs. Honeyblow burst into tears. The drops dried upon her flaming cheeks as the latched door vibrated under a tremendous thump from an unseen fist, and the voice of Mr. Wimper sang out:

"A'oy!"

"It's 'im!" whispered Mrs. Bliss, reconnoitring through the latch-hole. "Them sailormen 'ave brought 'im, as you said. The boy's there, too. Look an' see!"

"Oh, Hannah! that woeful wreck of humanity can never be my Daniel!" gasped Mrs. Honeyblow. "Don't—don't open the door for a second. I shall faint or something, I'm sure!"

"I've got somethink to do before *I* take an' faint," said Mrs. Bliss with determination. "I've got to prove as what this woeful human wreck ain't my Ben—an' I'm goin' to."

"Wh-what will you d-do?" whispered Mrs. Honeyblow through chattering teeth.

"Put 'im to the test," declared the stronger spirit, untying a coloured apron and revealing the smarter one beneath. Then she opened the door. The stout, red-bearded seaman was standing vacantly staring on the doorstep, the small boy, whose wardrobe had been augmented by several charitable contributions, stood behind

him, and four attentive mariners mounted guard upon the fence.

"Good-day!" said Mrs. Bliss, with a beaming smile.

"'Day!" said the stout seaman briefly. His eye, travelling beyond Mrs. Bliss to the face of Mrs. Honeyblow, grew stonier, his vacancy of manner more laboriously pronounced.

"I needn't 'ardly say you're welcome, Cap'n Honeyblow," said Mrs. Bliss. "Step in, sir, step in. You'll find your good lady 'ere. Ain't that pleasant?"

"I don't know what you mean," said the stout seaman, taking refuse in one side of his dual personality. "I'm Ben Bliss, that's who I am—never was anybody else—and this lady is nothing to me! I've found my lost memory—and I remember everything!"

Spurred by disavowal to resentment, Mrs. Honeyblow tossed her head, while Mrs. Bliss for the moment lost hers.

"Speak to 'im, lady!" pressed the alarmed Mr. Mix. "Take 'is 'and an' call 'im a pet name. It might bring 'im to 'isself."

"There's your missus, Benny, ole man!" urged Mr. Wimper willingly. "Say, 'Ta, ta,' an' give 'er a pretty kiss!"

"If 'e does," said Mrs. Bliss, regaining her self-command, "it won't be before all the riff-raff o' the town. I should 'a' thought you'd been cured o' keepin' low comp'ny, Ben, by 'arf of what you 'ave went through. Now you can come in, if you like, an' make yourself at 'ome, but no choppin' an' changin'. If you say Ben, you stay Ben—an' so you can make up your mind to it."

Holding the door invitingly open, the intrepid laundress waited, her eyes fixed upon the perturbed countenance of the stout seaman, who hesitated, fidgeted, and then to the unmixed triumph of Mr. Wimper, and the consternation of Mr. Mix and his contingent, stepped

boldly over the threshold. Much fluttered, and with a growing sense of injury, Mrs. Honeyblow took leave.

"It's quite like old times to 'ave 'ad you 'ere, Miss 'Arriet," said Mrs. Bliss. "My respects to Doctor Venables, Mrs. Honeyblow, ma'am, when next you see him. And I hope it'll be soon!"

An electric shock seemed to dart through the frame of the stout seaman as the door shut and the distant gate clicked behind the retreating figure of Mrs. Honeyblow.

"She always 'ad a pretty figure," said Mrs. Bliss, as she shut the door. "Plumper than wot she used to be, a bit—but— There, she's dropped 'er 'andkerchief. Miss 'Arriet! Miss! Ah! the boy's run after an' give it 'er, an' now they're walkin' off together."

"Call 'im back!" said the temporary Mr. Bliss earnestly. "He's not fit for a lady to talk to. Call the little demon back! He'll——"

"They're out of 'earing now," said Mrs. Bliss, shutting the door. "Per'aps she've took 'im on to see the Doctor. She 'as a great admiration for Doctor Venables, 'as Mrs. Honeyblow!"

"She's hard up for something to admire, then!" growled the temporary Mr. Bliss, grinding the leg of his chair savagely into the brick floor. "What any woman can see in that long, veal-faced, dab-handed, tow-haired apothecary, I never could understand."

"Your memory's clearin' by degrees," said Mrs. Bliss pleasantly. The stout seaman instantly relapsed.

"It's odd, ain't it," observed Mrs. Bliss after a short pause, "that Mrs. Honeyblow don't take and marry again?"

"She can't legally unless she can prove her first husband, Captain Honeyblow, is dead or has deserted her; and then the shortest time she can marry again is in seven years," the stout seaman replied glibly.

"She proved 'is will a year ago!" said Mrs. Bliss, bustling about.

"Did she?" The stout seaman turned bright purple.

"An' she gave a lot o' money—'underds, they say—to found the 'Seamen's Temperance 'Ome'—and Mr. Venable is paid Medical Officer to the foundation," went on Mrs. Bliss.

"Is he?" jerked out the stout seaman, apoplectically. "The hound! The sneaking hound!"

"Lor', Ben! I thought you was always so partial to 'im!" giggled Mrs. Bliss, as she set on the kettle and placed a hospitable bloater on the gridiron. Its searching perfume reached the nose of the listening Mr. Limbird, for whose supper it had been intended, and the night-watchman ground his teeth with rage. "Ah, I see you a-starin' at that corner," Mrs. Bliss continued. "You miss—and well you may!—somethink out o' there. Your second look 'as always bin for that when you've come 'ome from a v'yage. Your first was——"

"For you, I suppose you mean?" said the stout seaman.

"For the beer-barrel, Ben," said Mrs. Bliss. "There you go again, lookin' in the corner. Your Aunt Sarah left it you, and well you might prize it. I've seen you move it—ah!—ten times in a day, you've mov' it, an' got out o' your bed an' miv it again! But, o' course, you know what I mean?"

"You're talking about the clock?" said the stout seaman quite pleasantly. Mrs. Bliss, horrified at the ill-boding accuracy of his memory, broke a dish, and Mr. Limbird broke into a cold perspiration.

"It's 'im! It's 'im!" he muttered feebly. The paper-covered door creaked under his lapsing weight, and Mrs. Bliss summoned all her energies for the final effort.

"There's other things besides the clock," she said, "an' t's nearly time for you to see 'em. Turn the bloater, Ben, while I run out for 'arf a sec'." She was gone in

a moment, and the temporary Mr. Bliss, to the great detriment of the bloater, leaned back in his chair and drew a long breath of relief.

"I was a fool to come here," he pondered, "and I'd be a worse fool to stay. Newspapers tell stories about men who've lived double lives for years. I've only led one since yesterday, and I defy ordinary flesh and blood to stand it over a week. Ben Bliss I can manage, and Daniel Honeyblow comes naturally enough, but Ben Bliss and Daniel Honeyblow at the same time——" He shook his head. "I ought never to have disappeared in the beginning," he sighed; "but the only thing left me, as far as I can see, is to disappear again." He crossed the kitchen softly and laid his hand upon the latch. Then it dropped to his side. For the paper-covered door in the party-wall opened, and the square head of Mr. Limbird, its features corrugated into a most uninviting scowl, was inserted through the aperture.

"No, you don't," said Mr. Limbird warningly.

"Don't what?" said the detected fugitive nervously.

"Cut an' run," said Mr. Limbird.

"I seem to know your face," said the stout seaman, trying to smile; "but faces change with years, don't they?"

"I should like to alter yours a bit," said Mr. Limbird. "'Alf a minute it 'ud take—not longer. What do you mean by comin' back? Why didn't you stay drowned if you was drowned? But some people are never content. They——"

"Now then!" cried Mrs. Bliss, as the kitchen door, thrown open, disclosed her as the centre of a group of youthful faces. "Here's father. Polly!"

"Yes, mother," said a long-legged girl of fourteen, with a bristling head of papers surmounted by a battered straw hat.

"What-wha-what?" gasped Mr. Limbird.

"Kiss your father, Polly!" ordered Mrs. Bliss, and the stout seaman submitted to the ordeal.

"She's more like you than ever," stated Mrs. Bliss. "Bill!"

"Yes, mother," yelled a chubby-faced boy of twelve, who held a top, a whip, and a partly consumed bunch of bread-and-treacle.

"Kiss your father, Bill," commanded Mrs. Bliss. "Jubilee, take your finger out o' your mouth, an' kiss 'im too. Elfred, blow your nose and do the same as Jubilee. 'Arriet, 'ave I got to tell you twice? Eddard Rex, I don't want to smack you again unless I'm forced to it. That's your little lot, Ben, an' I'm glad you've come 'ome to 'elp me keep 'em. I've 'ad enough to it!"

Surrounded by his surging family, the alleged Mr. Bliss looked the picture of misery. Mr. Limbird, his handkerchief jammed into his mouth, regarded the picture from a distant corner.

"Look well, don't 'em?" demanded Mrs. Bliss.

"Picture of health!" murmured the miserable victim.

"And grown?" inquired the laundress.

"Grown out of knowledge," stammered the victim.

"But you'd 'ave recognised their sweet faces anywhere, wouldn't you?" cried Mrs. Bliss.

The person appealed to snatched his cap and started for the door.

"Where are you going to, Ben?" Mrs. Bliss demanded.

"To buy the children sugarsticks," was the mumbled reply.

"You'd forget to come back," said Mrs. Bliss, "for nine years, p'raps, this time. 'Aven't you already took an' stopped away for two? I'm ashamed of you!" She darted through the paper-covered door of communication as she spoke, and returned instantly, carrying a vocal bundle. "Look at that!" she exclaimed, holding it up to the inspection of the unhappy stout seaman.

Mr. Limbird could restrain himself no longer. "That's my legal child, 'Annah Limbird, aged eight months!" he bellowed, "an' you're an impostor, Cap'n Honeyblow!"

"Prove it!" said the other heavily. "Prove it!"

"You've owned all these other kids as yours, 'aven't you?" yelled Mr. Limbird.

"You heard me!" said the other sourly.

"Well, they all belong to the neighbours, from the baker's Polly, down," said Mrs. Bliss cheerfully. "I borrowed 'em to unmask you with, Cap'n 'Oneyblow, an' I've done it. Run along 'ome now, Polly, an' you others. I'll give you a penny each to-morrow," she added, as her impromptu family trooped out at the door. "As for me an' Bliss, ourn was wot the books call a childless onion; but I've bin married to Limbird, there, goin' on twelve months." She dandled the baby with legally justifiable pride, as she added: "As to this game wot you've been playin', Cap'n 'Oneyblow, it won't wash no more than a fancy zephyr. Give it up, an' me and Limbird 'll 'elp you all we can. Not that you deserve 'elp, goin' away an' leavin' poor Miss 'Arriet a widow for close on two years, and now that you've come back denyin' of 'er to 'er face. But she's a kind 'art, an' maybe she'll forgive you all the sorrow you've caused 'er an' take you back again."

"I don't want her forgiveness!" said Captain Honeyblow stubbornly. "She ought to be begging mine on her bended knees, if the truth was known. And as for sorrow, she's had the Doctor to dry her tears. He seemed willing enough last time I set eyes on him!"

"We can't always trust to our eyes," said Mrs. Bliss. "If I 'ad, where would Limbird 'a' been by now? An' if Mrs. Honeyblow's as fond of Doctor Venables as you say, why didn't they risk it an' get married? I'm goin' up to The Vineyard presently with some linen, an' you'd best come, too. You can carry the baby—she wants a bit

o' fresh air—an' Limbird can carry the basket."

Captain Honeyblow, to give him the proper title he had so persistently abjured, gave in, and after some smartening on the part of Mrs. Bliss, who had made up her mind as to her plan of campaign, the trio set out. It was a fine evening early in May, the hawthorn-hedges were in blossom, and Mrs. Honeyblow, in a most attractive dove-coloured tea-gown trimmed with lace, was sitting on the verandah with a novel in her lap.

"She must 'a' had all them light-coloured things made ready an' waitin'," said Mrs. Bliss incautiously.

"Why, Hannah!" exclaimed Mrs. Honeyblow, coming down the verandah steps as the party emerged from the laurel avenue and approached the house.

"We're mixin' bis'ness with pleasure, 'm," said Mrs. Bliss, indicating her three companions. "Lor'! what's the use of nursin' a grudge! An' the baby's quite took to Ben. 'E carries 'er beautiful, don't 'e?"

And she proudly indicated the shrinking form of the supposed Mr. Bliss, whose flaming beard and redder countenance were partly concealed behind the draperies of his infant burden.

"I'm exceedingly—I hope—oh! wouldn't they?—I mean your husband and—the other—round to the kitchen door—beer——?" stammered Mrs. Honeyblow.

"They're much be'olden, Miss 'Arriet," said the wash-erwoman translating the invitation. "Ain't it pretty to see 'em!" she continued, as the supposed Mr. Bliss and his companions withdrew. "Him an' Limbird's like brothers."

"But does he know—have you broken the awful news?" cried Mrs. Honeyblow. "How did he—how did he take it?" she continued, as Mrs. Bliss nodded in reply.

"Not a cuss!" said Mrs. Bliss, wiping her eyes. "An' then 'is be'ayviour at meals! 'E's that refined with 'is

knife, it fair frightens me. O' course, 'avin' bin brought up by a good mother, I wipes me mouth on the tablecloth; but on'y fancy Ben askin' for a serviette!"

"Impossible!" choked Mrs. Honeyblow.

"They're things I wash," said Mrs. Bliss, "but should scorn to use—an' I thought I'd 'ave dropped when 'e did it. An' worse an' worse, he've borrowed the money from Limbird to buy a tooth-brush—says it's one o' the indispensable necessities o' life. Fancy Ben!"

"Hannah!" hissed Mrs. Honeyblow, clutching the laundress's arm. "Suppose it isn't—it isn't Ben, after all?"

"That's what I keep on a-sayin' to myself," said Mrs. Bliss with a sigh; "but use is everythink. If Cap'n Honeyblow had seen Doctor Venables take a cockchafer out o' your 'air every day for a year, 'e wouldn't 'ave let a thing like that drive 'im from 'is 'ome. Per'raps, if 'e could see it done agin, an' realise 'ow little there reely was in it, it 'ud bring 'im back to 'is right mind. That is, supposin' Ben is 'im."

"Oh, Hannah, when I remember some of the things that boy said to-day, I begin to believe it! No, *he* isn't here; I sent him over to the Doctor's to be questioned—Why—why," cried Mrs. Honeyblow, "here is Dr. Venables and the boy with him! The Doctor has dropped in to tea as——"

"Usual," volunteered Mrs. Bliss.

"As a little change," amended Mrs. Honeyblow.

"It's too early for cockchafers," said Mrs. Bliss, "or you might 'ave the 'ole thing 'appen again, an' put it fairly to the test whether my Ben is your 'usband or your 'usband is my Ben? Would a cochroach do? There's 'eaps in your kitchen."

Mrs. Honeyblow gave a little scream.

"Cockchafer an' cockroach," said Mrs. Bliss encouragingly. "It begins the same."

"But it wouldn't end the same," said Mrs. Honeyblow,

"for I should die of it."

"Pretend, then," said Mrs. Bliss, illuminated by an idea. "Let on as you 'ave a wasp or beadle or a caterpillar in your 'air, an' ask Doctor Venables to take it out for you. An' I'll manage so as my Ben an' your Cap'n 'Oneyblow sees the 'ole thing. If he's Ben, he'll take it smilin', an' if he's Cap'n Honeyblow, he'll take it ravin'. Now I'm goin' to fetch them both round from the kitchen."

And Mrs. Bliss disappeared upon this errand, as Mrs. Honeyblow went nervously to meet the Doctor, with whose long shadow Tommy's shorter and stumpier adumbration moved in unison across the lawn.

"My dear lady," Doctor Venables said as he greeted Mrs. Honeyblow, "I have put a series of the most searching questions to the boy, and came over thinking you would be anxious to learn the results of my informal cross-examination as speedily as possible. I have ascertained from the boy . . . By the way, I have always understood from you that Mrs. Bliss was a most estimable woman?"

"Quite so. Oh—undoubtedly!" murmured Mrs. Honeyblow.

"I grieve to have to tell you," said the Doctor gravely, "that her conduct has been, in some respects, most blamable. The real reason of her husband's sudden departure from home was—I blush to say it—that, on returning unexpectedly one day, he saw her being kissed by another man in the garden. Reprehensible!"

"Did—did the boy describe the—the other man?" stammered Mrs. Honeyblow.

"No," said the Doctor. "My dear lady, what—what has occurred?"

For Mrs. Honeyblow screamed aloud, and putting both hands over her ears, commenced to run in a jerky, aim-

screamed. "Oh! Take it out! take it out! The cockchafer—ugh! Caught in my hair!"

"Don't be alarmed! Certainly—with pleasure," said the Doctor, "if you could manage to stand still." But Mrs. Honeyblow kept on running, and the Doctor was obliged to run after her. "Where is it? I don't see it—where is it?" The medical gentleman panted as he gained on and overtook the quarry. "Why—why—you don't mean to say——"

"There isn't any cockchafer," said Mrs. Honeyblow. Her eyes sparkled, her flushed cheeks became her, her roguish smile was irresistible. The Doctor lost his head and kissed her. And as the bashful salute took effect on the lady's ear, a blood-curdlin' roar reverberated in the ears of the couple, and the Doctor, turning hastily, beheld a stout, red-bearded seaman who foamed with indignation, held back from wreaking violence on his own dignified person by a square-headed man who smiled from ear to ear, and a small boy who manifested equal enjoyment of the situation, while the culpable Mrs. Bliss, whose supposed lapse from propriety he had just dealt with so severely, clapped her hands in the background.

"You villain—you sneaking, tallow-faced villain!" bel-lowed Captain Honeyblow, "have I caught you at it again?"

"Not again, Daniel!" cried Mrs. Honeyblow, hanging on her husband's upraised arm, as Mrs. Bliss, overcome by the success of her ruse, relapsed into hysterics. "There really *was* a cockchafer before, and you were a jealous, hasty-tempered man to go off like that—without asking any questions!"

"I'll ask one now," said the unmasked Captain, turning a truth-compelling glare upon the Doctor. "Have you ever kissed my wife before to-day?"

"Captain Honeyblow," replied Dr. Venables, "upon my honour, I have never kissed your wife. The lady whom

you saw me—ahem!—kiss just now has been a widow—a widow, sir, for two years, and the salute was—a—the first I have ventured to offer. Did I do it, I ask you, as if I were used to it?”

“No,” admitted Captain Honeyblow. “To do you justice, it was a dashed bad shot. Somebody, kick that infernal boy and find out what he’s dancing for!”

“Because I’ve saved a real skipper, after all!” crowed Tommy.

The heads of four seamen rose up on the other side of the garden fence. Three faces wore expressions of great joy, the sentiments written upon the fourth were more ambiguous.

“Well, I’m blown!” said Mr. Wimper.

“Ain’t this a joyful day, Cap’n ’Oneyblow, sir?” said Mr Mix.

“With respects to that reward, lady, for findin’ your dear ’usban’?”

“Don’t yer make no mistake, ole man,” said Tommy.

“The bloke what found Cap’n ’Oneyblow—found ’im an’ brought ’im ’ome—was me, an’ don’t yer make no mistake about it.”

“Boy speaks the truth,” said the Captain gruffly.

VI

'AS PLAIN AS PRINT

A ROMANCE OF THE BASEMENT

I WAS in the Fif' Stannard when I left Bord Schole and went into Service as Paje at a fust class 'Ouse where mother Chared and Father 'ad bin Hed Coachy but took to Liquer when Lord Rejinald toke to motorcarse Bein' too nuffy for to lern to Drive an injin and Too Stout in Figger for a Shofure.

It was Chesterfield Squair corner 'ouse with the Dubble Areaa. They kep' 2 pare of Calves with Flowery Heds and a Butler in Plane Close much more like a Bishop than the One what used to call. My liv'ry was Riffle Green. Gilt Buttons 8 rowse. Mother said I was as like Her Brother Alfred what 'ad bin an Orseguard as Two Pease Excep for the Ighth an' the mustash. An I run Erands for the 2 Pare of Calves to get Brown and Limbird to tell me what they Eat in Erly Youth to make em run up to 6 feet 2. Also rub Musterd on my Upper Lip at Night by Advice of a Silly Ass with a large one what walked out with the Second Housemaid, But beyond Blisterse no Result, excep that Her Ladyship Rung for the Housekeeper an sed my Blood was Planely Out of Order an would Mrs. Smale see to it that the Boy got a Cooling Doase. Wich she did the old Cat, with Jollup overnite and Epsum Salts in the Morning.

When I Come on Duty again there was a Blank in

the Ouseold. Joliffe the Parler Maid Having Got the Sack for Answers and Unpuktualness. A New Gal Arived and I Opened the Side Door out of Curiosaty it being the Duty of one of the Females on the Staff. I piped her Getting Out of the Tacksi and sor her chuck the Shofure a Half Dollar as Cool an Easy as Her Ladyship Herself. Call Swells what you like they ave a way of Doing Things as takes the bun.

"I'm the New Parler maid. Tell one of the Servants to Bring in my Bags and Things," says she quite calm and cool.

"All Righto," Says I. "Suppose you Do it Yourself Miss?"

She stared down at Me with the Biggest Blue Eyes I ever see out of a Picture on a Hoardin and then the Puzzled look cleered off and she begin to Larf. Gals in London Service generally Fall off about the dominose but the New Parler Maidse teeth was the Prettiest and Whitest I ever see out of a Dentisses Door Case. I brought in the bag and a lite Cane trunk. As Mrs. Smale Come down all in a Flutter with her And to her Art.

"Oh your—Oh my goodness, I've bin hopin' you didn't really mean"—she begins.

"Shut up Smaley," ses the New Parler Maid givin' Her a Kiss. "Not Bifore the Boy. Little Pitcherse you know"—an she larfed like music.

"Ow dare you speak to me like that, Jones!" ses Mrs. Smale in a kind of faint raje, shakin her Cap ribbons an closin her Eyes.

"I beg your pardon mam and I hope you'll overlook it this time," says Jones.

"If you'll Come this way I'll show you your Room," ses Mrs. Smale and I never Know the Old Gal so Grashus Bifore. I piped 'em from the Landin an if she wasn't Helping Jones to Carry her Things strike me indipendent. When Jones Came down to join the serkle in the

Servants Hall she looked the Tastiest bit of Frock you could immajin in her Black Dress and Muslin Cap and Apron. The 2 Pair of Calves was knocked out o Theirselves and Morris the Butler what was a Widower and said e ad ad a daghter just like Jones what died in early Youth was a Precious lot too fatherly. The cook told him so to his Face, and judgin' by the grisly bits she carve for Jones at the six o'clock cold meat tea you could see what Mother calls a bowl of contempshun was Come into the Ouse'old. Me bein called to Duty by a telegraphic dubble nock and ring heerd no more than snaks as You Might say but Jones Was Not Aving the Wust of it When I lef.

I Took Up the wire to is Lordship As was Dressin for a Early Theatre Dinner manigments Aving requested no Lait Arivals as a Fust Nights Sho. His Lordship red the messige an Went Plunjin Acrost the Landing to Her Ladyships Room with is Braces ennyhow an is Air Brush strate down over is Eyes.

"Goodness Me Redgy," i Herd Her Ladyship Esclaim, "You Look like a Prehysteric Peep. What has Happined?"

"The Matter is that My Youngest Sister Susan As Bolted From Catanach Cassel," Cries His Lordship, Catanach Cassel Bein His Lordships Famalys Seet in the Higlands. "This is From My Father to Ask if She Has Took Refuge with me? The Hard-mowthed Little Devvle!" Nise Words For a Peer to a Dress to His Sister! "Is Dead Against Marrying Gowpen And Swares She Wont Have Ennybody But Barringley, a Porper Captain in a Higland Regiment."

"But Neerly sevin Fete High and as Handsum as Aunty Nowse," Says Her Ladyship With a sigh I should Not have Herd if my eer Had not Bin Close to the Keyhoale. "And Lord Gowpen Is a Dredful Little Bounder with Freckles as Large as Sixpenses, Marquis or No

Marquis. 'And I Suppose Poor Susan Has a Hart. Most of Us Hav When We're Yung," and Her Ladyship Sied Again. And I Only Got out of the Way as the Door Bust Open and His Lordship Strood Back Across the Passage Roaring.

"Ile Hav No Runawayse in My House. If she Comes Here Pack Her Back. i Forbid You to Harber her Or Countenance this Centimentle Nonsense with Barring-ley," an the Ole Ouse Shook as His Lordship Banged the Door. The Noise of the Chewmult Ad Penetrated to the Lower Rejions and i was Klosely qeshioned in the Servants All. But i kep My Own Kounsel an Lett on to Nobody.

Nex Morning I ad a Chanst of Doin a Bit of Mash on my Own for I Found Jones in the Drawrin Room with a Duster an a Fether Broom and no More Noshun Wot to Do with Em than a Pijon with a Pastry Roller. I Did Er Job for Er an "You are a Nise little Beggar!" says Jone an Give me a Arf Dollar all at onse. An Wile I did Er Dustin She Got the Blotter an Eld it to the Mankle Mirrer & Red Part of a Letter His Lordship Ad Bin Riting. "My Dear Susan i Am Moar Greaved & Shocked Than i Can Express at the News of Your Ribelliuos Conduck An Your Sudden Flite From the Shelter of Our Fathers Rufe. . . ."

"Old Ard Young Woman," i says "That aint the Strite Gaim watto." Jones give me a Larfin look over Her sholder & Her Eyes was as Bloo as Sum of the Stones in Her Ladyshipse Rings.

"Its to me," she says, "My name is Susan," & larfs in that luvly way She Had. "i Wish He ad Roat Sum Moar wile E were about it!"

"Wot Good" says i "when He Dont know Her adress. 'And its No use Her Cumming Heer bikause He rifuses to Harber her Under His Roof, i Herd him say so."

"Wont he?" says Jones & larfed so sweet & look so Hevnly while She dun it that i Had to throw the bits of the Japanese China Vawse what i Broke in my Emoshun in the Dustbin on the Q.T.

"I say" I ses Breethin as Loud as a Broken Down Cab Orse "when's your evenin Out?"

"Thursday," ses she.

"If you aint suited" i ses "I'm willin. Come Round to Tee at Mothers & I'll stand Two Riturns on the Bus to Putney Brig. You're the Nisest bit o Frock i ever see & now the Cats out of the Banbox."

"So you're in luv with me Buttonse!" ses She smiling.

"Strite I am," i says. "Don't let it Make you Prowd."

"Ah but i'm Ingaged," ses Jones, "& my Yung Man is Cumming to Take Me Out on Thursday."

"He'll 'ave to talk to me Fust," i says a doubling up my Arm to bring up the Mussle. "Mind that, Miss Jones."

But on Thursday When Joneses Young Man Came Ringing at the Side Door & Askin for Her it seemed like Temtin Providence to it a Man so Menny sizes Larger than Life.

"Ullo I Say!" says I "wot are You?"

"I'm a Footman," says He lookin Down "an I've Come to take My Young Woman Out Walking."

"Is the other of you arf your ighth?" says i Cheeky like, "Because if One of You stood on the Other Wun's Hed there Wouldn't be no more Trubble about Sendin Messiges to Mars."

Blest if e Didn't tip me a Dollar.

"You take my Message to Miss Jones," says He, a smiling and twisting 'is spikky yellor mustash. "Her Young Man is Waiting On the Door-step—as arranged. That's all."

That was all—as concerning my Unappy Weekness For Jones. A Footman neerly 7 feet igh with a mustash oo

could stand against. Mother could never ave fansied a Daughter-in-Law What took Such Care of Her Nails, she as offen told me so Preaps all is for the Best.

Three Munthse Jones was With us, and no Newse of Lady Susan ever Came to And. I Herd is Lordship Say She Could Not Ave Left England bikause Barringley the Porper Captain in a Higland Reggiment rimained at is Post. The Markis of Gowpen got Ingaged to Another Lady with No Objectshun to Freckles, and when i Told Jones she Clap er Hands & give me Ten Shillinse & she told me that Mrs. Smale Was Going to Interview Her Ladyship in the Mornin Rume at 12 sharp & if I felt intristed in Heering News of Her I Would be in my Usual Place at the keyole!

Sure enuf the Old Lady Russled up Nex Day. Wot was my surprise to Ear Her Tell My Lady that the New Parler Maid What Ad Give such satisfaction Wished to Leeve to Get Married & Bein Such a Good Yung Girl & Without a Mother Living & Mrs. Smale Aving Known Her sinse a child Mrs S beg leave to entertain the Yung Cupple at Brekfast in the Housekeeperse Room.

"Certainly Smale," ses Her Ladyship. "I have never seen the Young Woman Except at a Distance but sinse she is so Diserving the Brekfast shall be Here. Order a Nise Plain Wedding Cake & make the Occasion as festiv as Possable—i understand She is a Favourite in the Servants All."

i Neerly Busted my Buttons Orf at that the Other Wimmen ating Jones like Pisen, but Mrs Smale Curtsey & thank Her Ladyship in Joneses Name & Her Ladyship say she will Make a Point of Looking In & Wishing the Young Cupple Joy.

"i Hope the Yung Man is Respectable," says she.

"Oh quite, your Ladyship," says Mrs. Smale, Smiling Herself into Creeses and Then to My Surprise & Delite the Old Gal Beg Leeve to Give notice Aving Ditermined

to Retire On Her Savings to A Little Ouse at Forrist Gait. She Ment to Lieve the Morning Jones was Married. She was as Diggerfied And jenteel as a Telegraf Post & Her Ladyship sed she Could Not But Consent but Deeply Rigretted So Werthy A Servant & Giv the Old Gal a Karbunkle Broach. N.B. Well She Knoed She Would Get the Sak over What Was About to Cum Out.

That Weddin of Joneses Was a Regler Beeno. All the Staff Ad Bin Ast & Gave Presints, the 2 Pair of Calves Galantly Clubing Fundse to Buy a Plated Tost Rack. The Cook come out Strong in the Cake Dipartment. i Spent A Doller On a Lais Vale for Jones & a Pare of Wite Cotton Gluves For Myself. All the wimmen Cride like Leeky Water Cartse During the Sacred Seremony. Jones was a Vision Of Buty in a Plane Traveling Dress & Didn't the Long Curit Jump when the Bride and Bridegrum Sined the Redgister Oh No!

Joneses Husband Shut Him Up Sharp, wisperin Sumthing in is Large Red Eer & Back We all Droav in the Privit Omnibus to Brekfast. i never see a Niser Spred. The Caik was a Triumph of Genis & His Lordship Sent Word for $\frac{1}{2}$ a Duzzen of His Best Champagne To Be Used. The Butler Proposed the Bride & Bridegrum in A Speech What Brought the Teers into His Eyes But When He Wanted For to Kiss Jones, Joneses Husband Took the Needle.

"I've put up With a Good Deal," I Herd Him say, "but When it Cumse to My Wife Being Kissed By a Butler On Her Wedding Day I Draw The Line by Gingo!" & He Twisted His Yeller Mustash & just Then in Cumse my Lord & Lady Redginald & Everybody Get Up.

"Please Charge Your Glasses," ses His Lordship Tryin To Find His Eyeglass Wich ad Got Down Inside is Weskit: "Lady Redginald & Myself Ave Great Pleasure in Wishing Goy to Jones & Her Husb—Why, Dammy

Barringley, its You!" And just then Lady Redginald Gave a Shreek.

"Susan!" she screams. "Susan!" And She & Jones Rushes into Eech Otherse Armse & Bustes Out Crying As His Lordship & Captin Barringley Glares at Eech Other Like 2 Mad Bullse.

"Smale you old Meddler, This is Your Work," says His Lordship & the Old Gal ups & says it is & Wotse Moar She's prowed On it An She Never Shold Rigret Helpin The Deer child She'd Nussed To a Good Usband.

"Good . . . I've got my Own Opinion about That," says Is Lordship.

"Make up Your Mind Which You're Goin to Do," says the Captin Twistin His Mustash, "Hit me Or Shake Hands. I'm Reddy For You Either Way & if I Don't Mistake you Found Out at Eaton Which Of us Was Best Man."

"Do You Expect the Duke to Overlook this Skandelous Elopement, this Disgraceful Conceelment & the Clandestine Marriage Wich Crowns The Whole?" Dimands His Lordship as Lady Susan lets Go of Lady Redginald & Takes Old of the Captain's Arm.

"I came straight to My Brotherse House," Says She With a Prowd Look of Defianse, "i Hav Lived Under His Roof For the Last 3 Munthse, My Husband Has Visited Me Here & Here My Wedding Took Place With Your Consent. You cant Deny it!"

"No By Gingo i cant," Says His Lordship, "i pade For the Cake & I shall Have to Pay the Piper. Give me a Kiss, & We'll Order the hauto Brooam to Take You both to the Stashun. Come upstairs, Young People" . . . i Herd Him Say to the Captain in a Wisper As He Drew the Gallant Bridegroom into the Smoaking Room "In For a Peny in For a Pound. How Mutch Shall i Draw it For, Barry Old Man?"

Lady Susan Sent For Me Bifore the Cupple Left For

the Kontinet & Gave Me a Kiss and Suvring. i kep
the Suvring over a Week & if My Yung Woman Ever
'Asts Why the Lef Side of My Fase is Barred off From
the Public i will tell Her Strate. There Are Sum Things
A Man Never Forgets & Jones Was My Ferst Love.
N.B. i mean Lady Susan.

VII

THE OLDEST INHABITANT

A STORY FOR BIG GIRLS AND BOYS

I

"IF we'd been alive in those times when they unheaded people with axes for bein' tr'waitors to their King and countr'wy," remarked Perto, otherwise Rupert, aged nine, to Robina, his elder by a year, "I shouldn't be at all s'prised if we'd been dead now." He paused after this utterance, and added, "for having such a thing as German measles when we're at war wif Germany. At least, that's what the Doctor said was the matter wif us when we came out all over spotty 'rwed, and after they made the school r'woom into a Hospital-ward with sheets made wet in pink water hung over the doors, and you and me had to go to bed there with a new nurse to look after us in a cr'wackly cotton fr'wock?"

"You mean disheaded and axeses," admonished Robina, who never failed to correct her young brother's faulty English when it jarred upon her sensitive ear, "and if you put in the w's after you r's, what good is there in pronouncing the r's anyhow? That's what mother would say to you if she were here."

"I just wish she was here!" aspirated Perto, changing his mind about yawning, and sighing instead.

"Then you're a selfish boy!" said Robina decidedly,

"don't you know that we're in this place because when we got up after the measles had gone in—Dr. Dolmege said we were just reeking with affection, and ought to be icerlated until our germs were all dead!"

"'Inflection' was what Dr. Dolmege said," corrected Perto, assuming for the nonce the rôle of a precisian in words.

"It means the same thing," stated Robina promptly—"reeking with defection—and mustn't go near mother's room for fear of giving the German measles to her and the new baby."

"I shouldn't have cared whether I gave German measles to the new baby or not," announced Perto, scowling as he kicked the rail of his chair. "But I should have minded giving 'em to mother."

"Be grateful that you're icerlated, then," said Robina sententiously, "or you would have liked a shot!"

A dismal break here occurred in the conversation. The temporary silence was filled by the swishing sound of rain, beating, as it had with brief intervals beaten for a week, against the latched casements of Miss Sarah Ann Twigger's cottage at Mold End, near the little country town of Plashingford in Werkshire. The wind also howled and moaned, as it had been howling and moaning for a period similarly prolonged, and a rusty-looking laburnum and a couple of apple-trees, laden with very sour-looking apples and decorating the little patch of soaked green lawn separated by a wet oak fence from a spreading expanse of boggy ploughlands, waved their branches as though in despair.

"If they must icerlate us," burst from Perto, "why do it in such a beastly place as this?—where it r'wains all the time, and they never have Flag-Days, or maroons—or searchlights—or Air-r'wuids—and nobody never tells you anything about the War, though we've been fighting the Germans for ages and ages. I think it's r'wotten!"

grumbled the boy. "Why, there might as well not be any War at all on!"

"We do get War-bread, now don't we?" demanded Robina, "and they say we're to have War-rations presently, unless the War stops pretty quick. I don't quite know what they are, but Miss Twigger says the shops won't be allowed to sell any more peppermint rock or toffee." She added as Perto emitted a low groan, "And the postman comes round in khaki on Thursdays and Saturdays—and doesn't come at all on Sundays—and there's going to be a Penny Reading at the Common Recrimination Rooms for the Benefit of British Prisoners in Germany—and a Dramatic Entertainment at the Plashborough Public Hall, in Aid of the Red Cross. Don't you remember the Entertainment at the Concert Hall at Lewisham—where we all dressed up—and incited—and you did 'Little Boy Blue,' and I was 'Little Miss Muffet' first, and did a hornpipe with a skipping-rope—and afterwards Britannia ruling the Waves in the Patriotic Tabloid at the end."

Perto assented sulkily, adding with rancour:

"That's how we came to catch those r'wetched German measles. They'd had 'em at Miss Skeffington's Academy for Backward Boys—and a whole row of 'em came. I should like to punch their beastly heads all round for spoiling our summer holiday!"

"You forget we'd had that with mother at Lyme Regis in July. And as father's business isn't looking bright just now, because of the War," said Robina, "wherever we went had to be cheap, and this was the very cheapest and healthiest place Dr. Dolmege could recommend. And he knew Miss Twigger to be eminently respectable because she had housekept for an old lady-patient of his for thirty years, and been pensioned off with an annuity, and——"

"Who is Anna Nuity?" demanded Perto, kneeling in

a low wicker chair, and rubbing his nose slowly up and down against the cold, damp window-glass. "The servant is Emma and Miss Twigger doesn't have a woman in to help clean, she says—because of the sugar and candles and soap and tea, and there's nobody else in the house but me, and you, and Shackleton-Peary——"

"Don't wake him!" said Robina, anxiously glancing at the large and handsome black-and-white half-breed Persian cat who lay outstretched in a galloping attitude in the precise middle of the Berlin woolwork hearthrug, worked by Miss Twigger's deceased employer, and representing a basket of yellow and scarlet tulips on a maroon ground bordered by a green vine-trellis, in front of the small fireplace, where, the day being wet and cold, a few sticks of apple wood burned. "He's been simply awful this morning! Playful, Miss Twigger calls it," she added, "when he worries other people's feet!"

"He bit my leg yesterday," said Perto gloomily. "He's always biting my legs! and he dabbed at me through the balusters as I was coming downstairs to breakfast, and nearly scratched out my eye!"

"And you mustn't hit him even if you weren't afraid," said Robina, "for one thing because his mother belongs to a salubriated breed of cats they have at a dreadfully grand place near here, called Nunbury Abbey, and for another, because Miss Twigger is a member of the Society for the Pervention of Cruelty to Animals."

"There's a Society for the Pervention of Cruelty to Children, isn't there?" demanded Perto; and when Robina replied that she believed so, he retorted, "I know there is. And if that Society only knew how this cat behaved to us—they'd do something that would teach him manners!"

"Miss Twigger loves him as the apple of her eye," explained Robina. "Emma told me yesterday. You see, he was born when two salubriated exploring-men were

looking for the Poles—and nobody knew which of them would be the first to get there and hang up his flag. So, as Miss Twigger wanted her kitten to have a distinguished name—she called him after both of them. Ugh! you disagreeable beast!" hissed Robina, glaring at the animal, "I'd baptize you all over again and call you the Kaiser, if I could!"

On receipt of these uncomplimentary remarks, Shackleton-Peary merely purred as though in acknowledgment of an endearment, stretched, yawned, rolled over on his back, exhibiting a furry white waistcoat with a round black patch in the middle of it, and looking languishingly over the top of his own head out of a very yellow pair of eyes with perpendicular black slits down the middle of them, extended a neat, white-gloved paw invitingly towards Robina, who shrank back in alarm.

"If I didn't *know* you," she said, shaking her head reproachfully at the cat, who continued to leer invitingly, "I *might* shake hands. But I do, and I shan't, so there!"

Shackleton-Peary, thus rebuffed, reversed himself and rose, revealing himself as a large and fully-developed cat. He wagged his tail from side to side, and the black stripes down the centre of his yellow eyes grew round and glaring. The glare grew intent, his glittering white whiskers bristled fiercely. He hesitated a moment, choosing between Perto's feet and Robina's, and Robina hastily bounced upon the sofa and tucked hers under her frock, squatting Turkish-fashion, while Perto drew the wastepaper basket towards him and hastily converted it into an impromptu shelter for his menaced calves. Unhappily there was plenty of room left in the basket, and Shackleton-Peary, in the firm belief that Perto had invented a new and entrancing game for his especial delectation, dived in, and ecstatically embracing Perto's heather-mixture stockings with a black foreleg and a white one armed with formidable claws, applied his teeth with vigour.

"Take him off! Take him off!" yelled Perto, who had struggled out of the chair, though not out of the basket, and now hopped over the Kidderminster carpet of Miss Twigger's best parlour in the vain effort to release himself.

"Wait till I get my gloves!" began Robina, reluctantly untucking her legs and sliding off the sofa. "He's so frightfully thorny to touch!" Then as the black bushy fox-tail of Shackleton-Peary waved joyously over the edge of the agitated waste-paper basket, the sisterly desire to rescue Perto overcome Robina's fear. She grasped the tail, set her teeth and tugged hard. Shackleton-Peary wow-wowed and fuffed, but continued to worry. And at this juncture Miss Sarah Ann Twigger entered the apartment. The scene that her spectacled eyes beheld was one well calculated to rouse the fiery resentment of a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. And with a shrill exclamation of horror the proprietress of Shackleton-Peary rushed to rescue the imaginary victim from his supposed torturers.

"You ill-behaved, wicked little boy!" she cried. "You merciless little monster of a girl! Let the cat's tail go directly!"

"Do you suppose persons are going to allow themselves to be chewed and scratched," demanded Robina, obeying, but with a scarlet countenance of defiant indignation, "without doing anything to prevent it?"

"Just to please your ugly old cat?" added Perto.

"He isn't an ugly old cat. He is a magnificent and well-bred creature," retorted Miss Twigger, as Shackleton-Peary, with every claw well padded and a cheerful smile of good-natured amiability on his whiskered countenance, emerged from the basket and bounded to his mistress's shoulder. She continued, as the cat rubbed his sleek piebald side against her lean cheek, and the ear from which dangled a long old-fashioned jet earring, and

purred a hypocritical song: "Poor Kitty! did ums try to hurt you? And if the innocent animal *had* bitten or scratched either of you," she continued, addressing her young charges, "you would only have had yourselves to thank. As it is, you will each of you go upstairs to your respective bedrooms and remain there until tea-time. Walk!"

Perto, waved to the door, made for it in a sulky sham-ble. Robina, with blazing eyes and crimson ears, wheeled in the act of following him, and rebelliously addressed Miss Twigger:

"When Perto and me were sent down here, it was to get our skins changed in country air, and not to be scolded and punished."

"Leave the room, Robina Grayson!" commanded Miss Twigger, indicating the doorway with a red and knuckly finger adorned with three or four very loosely-fitting old-fashioned rings.

"We don't want to stay in your old room!" said Robina loudly. "We don't want to stop in your poky old cottage. We don't like it! We don't like your cat, and we don't like you! And I shall write and tell mother so, and ask her to send for us to be sent home to London."

"You will, will you?" demanded Miss Twigger, as Shackleton-Peary, folding his forepaws comfortably on her black silk shoulder, hoisted his tail as high as possible, and waved it as if in triumph.

"That's what I've said," retorted Robina.

"And suppose Mrs. Grayson doesn't want to have you back?" demanded Miss Twigger again.

"She will want to," said Perto bluffly as Robina faltered, "when she knows how beastly you and your cat, and your cottage and your village are!"

"Are you aware, you extremely uneducated little boy," asked Miss Twigger, after a brief but scorching pause,

"that you are addressing the trusted companion and permanent housekeeper of the late the Venerable Mrs. Archdeacon Whidderall, and that my cat is the handsomest cat, and my lodgings the most respectable lodgings, and the village the most picturesque and healthy village in all England?"

"Not to mention the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Dominions Beyond the Seas!" put in Robina pertly. She knew that the words were pert, for they gave her a twinge of uneasiness in speaking them, just as if she had bitten upon a hard piece of toffee with a loose tooth. To disguise this she looked out of the parlour window just as the sun shone out brightly, and old Mrs. Shakerly's niece, a mild-looking elderly woman with a patient, worried air, went by, pushing old Mrs. Shakerly in her Bath chair.

Now, old Mrs. Shakerly was the pride of Mold End, since Mold End had recognised her as its oldest inhabitant. Generations of villagers had held her in disesteem as a covetous, quarrelsome and not too clean, temperate or honest old person, until the Vicar, who had been presented to the living a twelvemonth previously, sweeping through the Parish registers with the ardour of a new broom, had happened upon the entry of her birth, and discovered her age to be ninety-nine. After that Mold End regarded the old lady as its glory rather than its disgrace. Upon the morning of her hundredth birthday she had been awakened by the strains of the local choir, and upon its evening serenaded by the Club Band. A plated teapot and a new Paisley shawl had been subscribed for and presented to her with an Address signed by one hundred taxpayers, and finally she had been the recipient of a gracious message from Royalty, congratulating her upon the attainment of so great an age, and accompanied by the welcome gift of a new sovereign.

All this was fresh in the memory of Miss Twigger,

having, in fact, only happened the week before. She gazed at the nodding black-bonneted old head in the Bath chair with veneration, and when it had passed by, followed by the shabby straw hat and mild, sheepish profile of old Mrs. Shakerly's much enduring niece, she raised the red, bony, ringed hand and pointed to the receding object of her admiration, saying to Robina, who still rebelliously lingered upon the parlour doormat:

"Look there, Robina Grayson. Do you suppose a little girl as rude, and ill-bred, and ill-behaved as you are, will ever be congratulated by His Majesty King George the Fifth upon her hundredth birthday?"

The taunt cut deep into Robina's self-esteem, though had she stayed to reflect, she would probably have realised that the most polite, well brought up and nicely mannered of little girls must, necessarily, however long she remained one, be subject to an equally painful deprivation. Her lips quivered, her face flushed, and choking down her rising tears, she temptestuously quitted the parlour, rushed up the narrow stairs to her little slant-ceilinged attic bedroom, banged and locked the door, threw herself down on the small iron bedstead with the bumpy flock mattress and bolster, the chintz petticoat valance, and the knobby counterpane, and gave vent to a burst of indignant tears.

If you think Robina's conduct childish, you must pity her for not being quite as sensible as you yourself were at the age of ten. And Robina was some five days short of that. The thought of spending her birthday at Miss Twigger's lodgings was fraught with undeniable gloom. She got up from the bed presently, and dried her swollen eyes, and sat down at the little rickety round table in the window to write her threatened letter to her mother, before a notion budded in her brain that presently opened and disclosed such a wonderful plan that its inventor could hardly contemplate it without screaming. But Ro-

bina stuffed a pink-spotted cotton handkerchief into her mouth, and the scream could not squeeze by, fortunately or unfortunately.

For the next thing Robina did was to select from a special compartment of her desk a small sheet of shining rose-pink note-paper with a large gilt R in the top left-hand corner, and the address "Mold End, Nr. Plashingford, Werks," stamped on the upper right-hand side. You bought them at the Post Office already stamped with any initial you wanted, and the address, paying two-pence for three sheets and an envelope to match, though the cost had only been a penny before the war. And dipping the pen very carefully, and shaking the blob of ink off the nib-end on the faded carpet, Robina wrote "Laburnum Cottage" above the "Mold End," and then, with a trembling hand—"Your Madjesty," and knew by the odd look of the word that she had spelt it wrong and must take another sheet of the pink note.

This she did, and bit the pen-end in a silent agony of reflection before she began again. "Your Magesty" looked little less promising—and there was only one more sheet of the pink note left. With the boldness of desperation, Robina selected this, wrote "Laburnum Cottage" once more, and with a gasp began afresh:

"Dear King."

That seemed to her critical taste a little familiar. So she added "George V." and felt pleased. After that things went quite smoothly and the finished letter ran like this—

"Laburnum Cottage

"Mold End,

"Nr. Plashingford,

"Werks.

"DEAR KING GEORGE V.,

"I am staying in this village because of being

olated having had german meesles though pur British by dissent and eddukation and nearly thought your Majesty might like to know that on Seppتمبر 6th, which will be in a weak, I shall be 10 years old. Hoping this leaves you as it finds me,

“I am,

“Your affexionate Subbgect,

“ROBINA GRAYSON.”

How drunkenly the words stood on the paper! Robina understood by that how her hand must have shaken as she wrote. But the composition was quite good. Nobody would ever believe a little girl of not quite ten could have written it out of her own head. And then tears welled into Robina’s round gray eyes as she realised how unimportant a thing it must seem to a King to have a subject ten years old.

“They’re like pictures and china and violins—they must be awfully old to be of any value!” she said under her breath.

And then, on an instant it happened. Robina had taken up the still inky pen, added another 1 before the 10, blotted it with her newest piece of blotting-paper, and gummed it securely inside the envelope almost before she knew what she was doing. On the envelope she inscribed:

“THE KING,

“Buckingham Pallas,

“London.”

She blotted that, stuck a stamp in the corner and felt reassured, because the bearded face of the gentleman upon it looked so good-natured and kind. Then, just before the noisy little bell tinkled that summoned the young Graysons to Miss Twigger’s five o’clock tea-table,

the gate-bell rang, and Polly Thwaite the postman-girl came in and went up the path that led to the side-door, counting a handful of letters as she went. When Polly delivered them and came back again, her eyes were free to look about. She caught a glimpse of Robina's flushed face looking through the open window under the still dripping thatch of the attic gable, and nodded good-humouredly. "Nothin' for 'e, missie," she said, for Robina was a favourite of Polly's. "Nothin' for 'e this toime."

"I know. I didn't expect . . . Perhaps there will be a letter for me inside one to Miss Twigger," Robina said loudly, leaning out. Then showing Polly a corner of the pink envelope . . . "Will you post this for me? *Carefully?*" she asked with an effort.

"A'right!" nodded Polly. "Drop un in my apern!" she added, extending the blue checked garment, and Robina let go the pink envelope and saw it flutter down safely and vanish in Polly's pocket without Polly having once glanced at the address. And then the little bell tinkled again, and Robina ran downstairs to partake of war bread and margarine-cum-butter, weak tea and "Shaker" oats, moistened with milk and with last year's green gooseberry jam to help the stodgy stuff down.

But all Robina's rebellious resentment and indignation had exhaled in the writing of that letter. She was twitted by Miss Twigger about the stains of ink upon her fingers, and took the nagging meekly. She even asked for and obtained permission to offer to Shackleton-Peary, whose appetite for all descriptions of food was as boundless as his appetite for mischief, the larger half of her portion of "Shaker" oats, of course without jam, and submitted to hear the act referred to as a tardy atonement for her ill-usage of an affectionate and playful animal.

In fact, for the whole of the day upon which that fateful pink envelope had fluttered out of the window, and

for a week of days following, Robina was as meek as nearly could be—a model little girl. So much a model, that Miss Twigger began quite to “take to the child,” as she expressed it, while the submissive attitude of the taken-to one with regard to Shackleton-Peary evoked the contempt of Perto, and deprived Miss Twigger’s sportive favourite of a great deal of fun. By the time Robina’s birthday arrived, and it advanced as slowly as birthdays have a knack of doing, Robina had nearly forgotten the letter. But whether she remembered it or not, she had written it and posted it, and so set working machinery of a highly elaborate kind. As she was fated to discover before very long.

II

I shall not try to describe the presents received by Robina upon her birthday morning. Everything Robina had thoughtfully named in advance to grown-up relatives as likely to be most acceptable to a little girl upon her tenth birthday was contained in the parcels, with several other things of which Robina had not thought. Perto gave her a new fishing-line with a quill float, his own being out of repair. As Robina hated fishing and would not own a rod, the prudent Perto thus combined the credit of generosity with the certainty of personal advantage. Red-cheeked Emma had furbished up a pincushion bordered with somewhat dusty shells, and Polly Thwaite, the post-girl, who had heard of the approaching anniversary from Emma, sent three bunches of very green watercress tied up in the previous day’s issue of the local newspaper.

Mrs. Grayson had particularly stipulated that there should be no interference upon Miss Twigger’s part with the home correspondence of the young Graysons. Consequently, the armful of attractive-looking packages deposited by the red-cheeked Emma upon Robina’s bed

on the birthday morning was accompanied by half-a-dozen pleasant-looking envelopes that had undergone no previous examination by the sharp eyes behind the shiny spectacles of the trusted companion and permanent house-keeper of the Venerable Mrs. Archdeacon Whidderall.

Robina's father sent a blue Postal Order for seven-and-sixpence inside his letter. Nurse enclosed a shilling wrapped up in pink blotting-paper in the corner of hers. Aunt Ethelberta's heliotrope envelope, directed in her well-known, square-cut hand, might possibly contain another Postal Order for ten shillings, and proved to do so. There was another envelope, larger, squarer than any of the others, with a small crimson Crown Imperial upon the envelope-flap, and the address upon the thick creamy white paper was type-written, and rather odd :

"TO MRS. *or* MISS ROBINA GRAYSON,
"Laburnum Cottage,
"Mold End,
"Plashingford,
"Werks."

it ran. And—Robina's heart gave a great heavy bump against the front of her frilled nightgown, and the roof of her mouth went dry as bone, as she noticed on the flap of the envelope that quite small, quite unostentatious Imperial Crown stamped in brilliant red.

Then you might have heard Robina give a little shrill scream like a shot rabbit—it is not a nice thing to hear—as she dived in one moment, down under the bedclothes right to the bottom of the bed. Some of the presents stayed on the quilt, the others, those that were at all heavy or toppl'y, shot, bounced or rolled off the upheaved coverlet in various directions. Robina never thought of them, or of anything but the awful letter she yet held clutched tightly in her hand. Down in the stuffy dark at

the bed-bottom she realised, perhaps imperfectly, but yet horribly enough, what the kind of ball was that her push had set rolling. And it was a spherical mass of retribution, heavy as granite or as lead.

She was very pale when she came up for air, exactly as the sea-lion at the Zoological Gardens bounces up in the middle of his circular railed-in pond. Her eyes bulged quite as glassily as the sea-lion's, though her hair was much less sleek. She had got to read the letter—and the bare thought seemed to set each dishevelled lock bristling on her head. Her small childish hands shook as she opened the dreadful envelope and drew out the folded sheet. Underneath a second small red crown the type-writing began again. It was—it *was* the answer to Robina's letter to the King! And the answer, in very short lines, ran like this:

"Lord Stanfurdhurst is commanded by the King to thank Mrs. or Miss Robina Grayson for her letter, and to wish her many happy returns of the anniversary of her 110th birthday, occurring on the date of September 6th."

That was all, yet how much it signified.

It meant for one thing that Robina Grayson, the loyal and affectionate subject of His Majesty had told a lie to her Sovereign.

It meant, for another, that Miss Twigger, in calling the said Robina Grayson ill-bred, had been perfectly right.

It signified yet more. . . . The getting-up bell tinkled shrilly before Robina had worked out that third significance. And then the conviction that in deceiving her monarch she had committed High Treason and stood in danger of being imprisoned in the Tower of London if

not of being beheaded or shot, or hanged, nearly sent her down to the bottom of the bed again.

But Robina managed to get washed and dressed, though she looked very queer when she was finished. Her appearance seemed to strike Miss Twigger, for when she had said Grace and begun to pour out the breakfast coffee, she glanced quite kindly at the conscience-stricken Robina and said:

"I hope you mayn't be sickening for a relapse of those German measles, child. You look like it!"

"Do I?" faltered Robina. She rubbed her pale cheeks with her handkerchief and looked at the handkerchief absently.

"If your friends and relations were so disloyal to their country as to permit you to catch a complaint with a name like that—and so disregardful of the injunctions of the Food Controller as to send you sweets for a birthday present," said Miss Twigger, "you ought to have had the sense not to begin on 'em before your breakfast. But it's no use talking. The thing's done! And all the King's horses and all King's men can't undo it!"

Robina jumped, the words sounded so fateful, and turned, first so red and then so pale, that Miss Twigger broke off her breakfast in the middle, mixed her young charge a hot half-cupful of soda-mint, and sent her to lie down in the best parlour.

"And Emma will put you to bed if you don't feel better as the morning wears," said Miss Twigger. "It's unlucky that I'm obliged to go out this morning, but I have to call at the Vicarage. The Vicar wants to see me about some business, his note says, but it's not very clear: he seems not to be quite sure what the business is, himself." And she went away and put on her stiff bonnet and black beaded mantle, her square-toed walking shoes, her long-fingered black kid gloves, took her horn-handled umbrella and departed with a final warning, while Robina lay upon

the slippery hair-cloth sofa, and felt like nothing but a crushed worm.

III

Perto peeped into the parlour presently, and seeing his sister's eyes wide open, approached the sofa.

"Did you like my pr'esent?" he asked, looking slightly mean.

"Ever so!" answered Robina, who was in the peculiarly humble mood that returns extravagant thanks for minute favours. "It was frightfully good of you to buy me that fishing-line," she continued, "and I promise you I'll never part with it, not to anybody!"

Perto wriggled rather.

"That's all r'wight," he said awkwardly. "I was r'wather afr'waid that you'd want me to take it back, as you don't ever go fishing and I do. But I'm glad you're pleased. I say! Here's somebody coming."

To the accompaniment of the tuff-tuffing of a motor-bicycle the straw-hatted upper half of a young gentleman had previously shot past the top of the green privet hedge that enclosed the prim little front garden. The snort of the machine, suddenly arrested in mid-career had followed. Now the green-pointed wooden front gate swung open and the young gentleman came in, wheeling his motor-bicycle and holding his straw hat in the hand he wheeled with, while he wiped his heated forehead with a pink and yellow silk handkerchief held in the other. The forehead was very tall and the young gentleman was very dusty and hot. He kicked out the stands and propped his machine in front of the neatly-whitened doorsteps, then he dived under the porch and a brisk rat-tat-tat and bell-ring followed the dive. In the distance the heavy feet of Emma could be heard moving towards the door.

"I wonder who that man is and what he wants?" said Perto.

"He wants Miss Twigger, I suppose," said Robina, sitting up on the sofa, and wondering if any little girl had ever had such an uncheerful birthday before. "And Emma's telling him she's not at home."

Emma put her head in at the parlour door then. There was a queer expression on her round fresh face.

"A gentleman from Plashingford," she said, "and he wants to see you, miss."

Robina was re-tying the blue silk bow that usually fastened back her top hair. If she had not held on tight to both ends of the ribbon she must have dropped.

"You're mistaken," she faltered. "He means Miss Twigger."

"He don't," said Emma. "'Twas Miss Robina Grayson as pat as you please. Only——" and here Emma's eyes vanished in mirthful pink creases, "he says, 'Will the old lady see me?' instead of 'will the young.' He's a funny gentleman. And he comes from the office of *The Plashingford Trumpeter*. That's the newspaper missus doesn't take in because the politics be Radical. She has *The County Indicator*, and what be I to say? Will you see the gentleman? He says it's of particular importance." And Emma, in whose cotton under-pocket a shilling was burning, jerked her chin in the direction of the hall door.

"But what does he want to see *me* for?" hesitated Robina.

"Maybe," said Emma, grinning, "because to-day's your birthday. Shan't I show him in?"

Robina felt sick in spite of the soda-mint. She drooped her head, speechlessly, and Emma popped back into the hall. Next moment she ushered in the young gentleman. He began a respectful bow, which ended in a start. He was dressed in a gray knicker bocker cycling suit with

green stockings with ornamental tops and brown shoes, which like the rest of him, were dusty, and he wore gilt-framed eyeglasses which sat rather crookedly on a high-bridged pink nose. Through the glasses he stared at Robina, and then his eyes began to twinkle, and he showed rather a nice set of long white teeth in an amused laugh.

"This is a rummy start!" remarked the young gentleman, looking pleasantly from Robina to Perto and back again. "Now I know why the girl—she's rather pretty!—seemed tickled. Her joke, of course. And I'm fond of jokes, if I had time to enjoy 'em." He drew from an outer pocket in his coat a fat notebook with a khaki cover, and extracting a shiny black fountain pen from another pocket uncapped it, flipped it in the air and tried the point critically on his thumb, saying: "But if I'm to get an interview with Miss Robina Grayson—or is it Mrs.?—published in to-morrow's issue of *The Plashingford Trumpeter*—and that's what our Boss has set his heart on—I've got to look slippy. For worlds I wouldn't have that fellow Mouteney of *The County Indicator* get in first—" He broke off as the sound of wheels plashing through the drying puddles in the road came to his ears. The garden gate clicked as the young gentleman spoke the last three words. He looked sharply towards the window and frowned, as a resounding double knock shook the walls of Laburnum Cottage, and Robina looked towards the window too, and saw that an ancient four-wheeled cab drawn by a decrepit steed stood before the garden gate, upon which its driver leaned, in familiar conversation with the person who was knocking.

"Never 'eard of the old lady myself," Robina heard him saying. "But live and learn." Next moment Emma opened the parlour door.

"Another gentleman to see you, Miss Robina," she

choked out, and as the gentleman entered she banged the door behind him, and fled, crowing with laughter, down the passage.

"Your servant, madam," said the gentleman who had entered. Elderly, stout and bald, with a fiercely-waxed moustache, he was dressed, to describe him from the feet upwards, in rather cracked patent-leather boots, rather baggy brown trousers, rather a seedy black frock-coat, rather a soiled white vest, frayed and ink-stained, rather a greasy red necktie, and rather a cheap onyx tie-pin. His notebook was ready in his hand, his eyes looked weak and short-sighted, and he mechanically felt for his eyeglasses as he bowed vaguely to Robina, who sat upon the sofa, not because she was lacking in good manners, but because her legs had gone soft and jellified, as it seemed to her, and were incapable of holding her up.

"Permit me to introduce myself, madam, as Mr. Mounteney of *The County Indicator*," said the new gentleman, busily feeling for the eyeglasses which hung at the full extent of their thin black cord down the middle of his portly back. "This is a memorable and a remarkable anniversary, the second, too, of the kind within a fortnight, and the *Trumpeter* having got in before us on that occasion—they have a very pushing person on their staff named Ticking—our Chief, madam, was desirous to secure an interview with you as a special attraction for to-morrow. Dear me! where are those glasses?"

"Hanging down the middle of your back," said the young gentleman in the cycling suit. "It's a fact," he added, "as sure as that pushing person of the name of Ticking has got in before you again."

The stout gentleman, red to the top of his baldness, muttered a word that was lost in his moustache, and revolved in search of the missing eyeglasses, which Perto considerably found and handed him. Then he turned to Robina and made another bow.

"Madam," he took the eyeglasses in both hands, "let me hope that the enquiries of Mr. Ticking have not prejudiced you so strongly in disfavour of Press interviewers that you cannot grant me the privilege of a brief conversation. I am aware, madam, that German measles, contracted at the venerable and remarkable age you have to-day attained, cannot but be weakening to the system. But you have happily recovered. Your family, your friends, your native village may without presumption hope to keep you for some years to come. Without regarding that hopeful future, madam, may I ask you to give the many readers of *The County Indicator* a peep into your chequered and profoundly interesting past." He put on his glasses, and his suave composure vanished. His eyes rounded, his cheeks became crimson, his mouth opened and words came bursting out:

"Great Jehoshaphat!" he shouted, "I've been talking to a little girl!"

"Oh, my hat!" gurgled Mr. Ticking, who had dropped on Miss Twigger's shiny American cloth-covered arm-chair and now lay back holding his sides in convulsions of laughter. "Oh, my hat! if you'd only seen yourself, Mounteney, and heard—and heard——" His tearful eyes ran over, he crowed and panted and gasped in ecstasies of laughter, and Perto laughed too, he did it so queerly.

"If this is a joke," said Mr. Mounteney with quivering red cheeks, bristling moustache, and eyes that were fierce behind his eyeglasses, "I'm hanged if I see it! I called at this house to see Miss or Mrs. Robina Grayson. Does she live here or does she not? Reply, young lady!" His fierce little eyes dug into Robina and screwed an answer out.

"She *does* live here. And she is Miss Robina Grayson and not Mrs.?"

"Good, so far!" said Mr. Mounteney, folding his arms.

"Now, official intelligence having reached our Editorial Department that to-day is the hundred and tenth anniversary of Miss Robina Grayson's birth——"

"What?" yelled Perto suddenly.

"Don't interrupt, my boy," said Mr. Mounteney, giving Perto a glare of warning. "To-day," he went on, "completing the hundred and tenth year of this venerable lady, and a local Movement having its rise in our county town—being on foot to celebrate the occasion—which has already been marked by a gracious letter of congratulation from His Majesty the King——"

"Bosh!" muttered Perto, quite audibly.

"Myself and my colleague," put in Mr. Tickling glibly, as Mr. Mounteney turned to freeze Pero with another stare, "have been commissioned by our respective Bosses, to call in, look at the letter, and look up the lady in the way of Biz."

"Correct as to the general definition of purpose in calling," said Mr. Mounteney frostily, "But I must protest against the term colleague, as applied by you to myself. Neither is my respected Chief to be lightly——"

"Oh, very well! Don't upset yourself!" said Mr. Tickling easily. "Now, missy," he added, addressing Robina, time's precious. Will Miss Robina Grayson see us?"

Robina racked her brain for a reply. Then she heard herself say: "You're seeing me now. I am Miss Robina Grayson."

"Which accounts for the mix-up!" said Mr. Ticking, who had got out of the armchair. He produced his notebook as he spoke, and held his fountain pen ready. "Charmed to have the pleasure, Miss Robina. But the old lady is, slangily speaking, my game!"

"And mine," said Mr. Mounteney. Both men looked eagerly at Robina, and her straight black brows frowned at them over her angry gray eyes.

"She doesn't want to see either of you!" she said with perfect truth, and was pleased to see how limp both of the unwelcome visitors went all in a moment.

"Young lady," began Mr. Mounteney, bending towards her and speaking quite as though Robina were quite grown up, "could you but prevail upon your venerable and revered relative to grant a brief interview to me as the representative of an old established family newspaper of sound Unionist views, you would confer upon our readers—the list of whom embraces every person of respectability and standing within a radius of eleven miles——"

"I like that!" burst out Mr. Ticking.

"—You would confer a favour upon the public," went on Mr. Mounteney, looking full at Mr. Ticking without seeming to see him, "and a boon upon myself."

"Look here, little lady," urged Mr. Ticking, returning Mr. Mounteney's glassy stare and speaking to Robina, "I've biked five miles to get hold of some personal particulars, and I can guarantee as representative of a high-class Liberal newspaper that they will not, if given, be used in an offensive, or ill-bred, or illiterate manner, and that their publication will be of interest to a large community of paying subscribers and of profit to ourselves. We don't give away our paper," he continued, continuing to look hard at Mr. Mounteney, "we *sell* it. And people who want reliable information and the latest local and political news for nothing, are welcome to go and borrow the rag they publish on the other side of the street, though they don't get what they are looking for."

"Won't they?" sneered Mr. Mounteney, contemptuously.

"No, they won't!" retorted Mr. Ticking belligerently, "unless you happen to have boiled down the best of our previous issue's intelligence into a column of passably decent 'pars.'"

"Sir!" burst out Mr. Mounteney passionately, "I indignantly spurn the accusation! I grind it beneath my heel with contempt!"

"Spurn away!" retorted Mr. Ticking, red from his tall, stiff double collar to the parting of his curly fair hair. "Grind as much as you like, but unless you want to lose the readers who *are* subscribers, you'll go on gathering up the *Trumpeter's* crumbs."

"Look here!"—began the purple Mounteney. But Robina's desire to get rid of him, as of his adversary, overcame her alarm.

"Oh, *please* don't quarrel!" she begged. "Or if you must, do do it somewhere else!"

There was a pause. Both men looked rather silly.

"Ticking," said Mr. Mounteney, "I am your elder by a year or so." He purpled still more as Mr. Ticking, with a glance downwards at his own slim figure and another at his youngish reflection in the greenish little mantel-mirror, seemed to add, "And the rest!" "But," continued Mr. Mounteney, "at the entreaty of this innocent child, I am ready to set you an example of magnanimity." He extended a short, fat hand, encircled by a palpably paper cuff, covered with notes in violet-ink pencil, and contained in a frayed sleeve. "Ticking, I apologise. At this moment when our country strives in the welter of War with the treacherous Teuton, let us bury the hatchet of our private animosities, and admit the—ah, the existence of the Tie of Race. We are British subjects, Ticking, united in the firm determination to present an unblenching front to the Hun—our common enemy. In the name of our country, I suggest that we shake hands!"

"I'm agreeable if you are," responded Mr. Ticking. "I don't deny about our both being British though you have been British so many years longer than I have—and to put it personally, carry so much frontage, that you're not likely ever to see the Front."

He shook hands without enthusiasm afterwards, furtively—for Robina saw the action—wiping his hand upon the pink and yellow silk handkerchief.

"And now, Missy," he said to Robina, getting his notebook ready and for the twentieth time shaking up his fountain pen, "won't you tell us something about this dear old soul?"

"She is your great-aunt, I presume?" put in Mr. Mounteney; holding a stump of violet-ink pencil suspended over his left cuff. Robina shook her head.

"*Not* great aunt!" said Mr. Mounteney and Mr. Ticking, speaking together and simultaneously jotting something down. "What relation, then?"

Robina felt her head going round inside. She was awfully conscious of the round astonished stare of Perto, who at first had stood leaning his back against the parlour window-shutter, but who had been during this amazing interview gradually sinking lower, until he now squatted on a Berlin wool hassock upon the Kidderminster carpet with the top of his head on a level with the window-sill, and the tops of his eyebrows nearly touching his hair. But she had to say something, and she said it in a small, weak, flat voice: "Not my *real* great-aunt, that is. My *adopted* great-aunt."

Both men wrote something down, stopped in the middle of it and looked interrogatively at Robina.

"You mean, of course, that you're her adopted great-niece?" said Mr. Ticking.

"I mean nothing of the kind," said Robina a little angrily. "The adopting," she continued, "was on my side. I—I wanted a great-aunt rather particularly, and she hadn't any great-niece. . . . So it was arranged like that."

"You were relatives, of course. I judge by your names," said Mr. Mounteney, "being similar."

"I gave her that name," stated Robina, feeling as if

she were sliding down a smooth ice mountain with a bottomless abyss at the foot of it.

"—Gave her that name!" said Ticking and Mounteney quickly. Then they both looked up, and Robina said desperately:

"She hadn't any name of her own, you know. So I had her christened—soon after I found her."

"*What!*" exclaimed both the journalists, fixing circular eyes of astonishment upon Robina.

"Be so good as to let us have details," said Mr. Mounteney, who was beginning to breathe wheezily. "Ticking, this promises well for both of us!" he said, looking across the room at Mr. Ticking, who was lying back in the arm-chair, his legs crossed, so that his right knee was upon a level with his eyelids, and the notebook resting on his waistcoat, as he rapidly filled page after page with short-hand whirls and quirks.

"Where did you find her when you found her?" demanded Mr. Ticking, not noticing Mr. Mounteney, but turning his eyes on Robina over the top of his own left knee.

"On the—the sands at Lyme Regis," blurted out Robina, grasping at a recollection of the previous year's seaside holiday; "she had been abandoned," she added, "by some quite common people who wanted to get rid of her, and had gone back to London by the Excursion Return. And of course she was dreadfully thin, and mewing with hunger."

"'Mewing with hunger' is a picturesque way of expressing it," observed Ticking, who had been writing ravenously. "Something Kiplingesque about it, to me."

"Reserve comments, please!" said Mr. Mounteney, who had nearly covered the blank part of his left cuff. "Did you never trace the wretches who had deserted her?"

"Never!" said Robina, conscious of Perto's start.

"She was then, of course, far advanced in the vale of years?" said Mounteney, rubbing his nose.

"How old?" asked Ticking.

"Six weeks, Nurse guessed," said Robina wearily.

"Come, come!" said Mr. Ticking, looking reproachfully over the top of his knee at Robina.

"This is serious, you know!" added Mounteney.

"You can't mean," said Ticking, "that you only found and adopted this old lady as your great-aunt six weeks ago?"

"That's just what I do mean!" said Robina, defiantly, and the indelible ink pencil and the fountain pen gobbled up the statement greedily.

"Is the old lady an early riser?" Ticking was beginning.

"Ah, yes. As to habits and predilections," added Mounteney. "We shall be glad of some information——"

"Does she get up early and eat heartily?" interrupted Ticking.

"She never gets up," said Robina, more wearily still.

"Prostrate since the unnatural wretches deserted her——" muttered Mounteney, who had taken off his left cuff so as to be able to write upon the inside part.

"CAST ADRIFT," muttered Ticking reading from his notebook. "That goes into spaced caps, of course!"

"THROWN UPON THE MERCY OF A COLD AND HEARTLESS WORLD," quoted Mounteney from his cuff. He sucked the end of his pencil and hastily wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. "We may take it, then," he said to Robina, "that Miss Grayson is practically bedridden?"

"She is not bedridden," said Robina, "because she never goes to bed, you see."

Both the fountain pen and the ink pencil devoured this piece of information ravenously.

"As to diet, now?" hinted Ticking, looking up with half an eye.

"She doesn't diet!" snapped Robina, who felt lil grooded bull.

"FOLLOWS NO REGIME," read Mr. Ticking, mout the words as if they were all going to be printed in c tals. "NOURISHED ON NORMAL FOOD."

"HER MARVELLOUS DIGESTION," murmured Mounte as he wrote, "MIGHT PROVOKE ENVY OF MODERN LUL LUS. Couldn't you name a favourite dish or so?" looked enquiringly at Robina.

"Beefsteaks," said a voice that made both journa jump, and Robina's heart knock against the front of black alpaca schoolroom apron. The voice was Per "Beefsteaks, underdone, and toasted Dutch cheese."

"Great Scott!" gasped Mr. Ticking, jotting it dow feverish haste. "Anything else?"

"Macaroons," said Robina, before Perto could get the word.

"And potted lobster," said Perto loudly.

"HALE CENTENARIAN'S COMPREHENSIVE RANGE DIETETIC PREFERENCES," muttered Mounteney, "PR STAYING POWERS OF CONSERVATIVE OF ANCIENT REGII

"Politics tabooed," said Ticking, without looking "As to recreations?" he asked, jerking the questio Robina with his chin. "Does Miss Robina Grayson play——"

"—A game of cribbage," said Mounteney, taking question out of Ticking's mouth, "or dummy whist indulge in any other recreation?"

"She skips every morning regularly for half an l after her cold tub, before breakfast," said Perto lo "that's what she does!"

"Im-possible! At her age," ejaculated Mounteney

"All right, if you know best!" said Perto, staring fiantly at Robina. "But if you happened to be in room underneath hers you'd know!"

"Well, but at that age!——" argued Mounteney.

"It's the *reason* of her being that age," said Ticking impatiently. "Nothing like regular exercise for keeping people fit."

"She does Mandow's Physicking Culture Exercises, too," said Perto, "and Juju—something Japanese that teaches weak people how to break burglars' wrists and ribs."

"PHYSICAL CULTURE AND JIU-JITSU PRESERVE VIGOUR TO ONE HUNDRED AND TEN!" muttered Ticking, who had nearly filled his notebook. "Why an old lady like that ought to see us all out! Dancing about at her age as lively as—as a cricket." He caught the eyes of Perto here, who promptly said:

"It was the spider she did the skipping-rope hornpipe with—at the Red Cross Entertainment. Not a real spider, you know—only a boy dressed up. And she did Britannia afterwards—in the Patriotic Tabloid."

"Next time she does it," said Mr. Ticking heartily, snapping the elastic band round a notebook now filled from cover to cover—"tip me the date and I'll be there to see." He glanced at Mounteney, who had exhausted both cuffs and was now taking some final notes on his large pale thumbnail and continued, as he got up, pocketed his notebook, and heartily gripped and shook Robina's limp, cold hand; "I'm uncommonly obliged to you on my own account and *The Plashingford Trumpeter's*, and I heartily wish your adopted great-aunt may enjoy many more birthdays like this! Now I'm off. I can't offer you a lift behind me on the chuffer," he said, shaking hands with Perto and addressing Mounteney, "but perhaps that tottery old crock in your cab will get you back in better time than he brought you here, as he's eaten almost half of the front-garden hedge."

Mr. Mounteney received the remark of Mr. Ticking with studied indifference. "Good-bye, young lady," he said to Robina. "Convey my compliments and congratu-

lations to that noble, splendid old soul upstairs, and tell her that I wish there were more ladies like her to set an example to idle and luxurious young ones. A free copy of *The County Indicator* will be posted to her to-morrow."

"Oh, my sacred aunt!" said Ticking, who was just leaving the room. Mr. Mounteney hurried hotly after him to demand a reason for the ejaculation, and the pair could be heard wrangling in the hall as Ticking hunted for his straw hat, and Mr. Mounteney for his umbrella, and then they quarrelled furiously all down the garden. Fascinated, Robina and Perto watched them from the window, and when Ticking mounted his cycle and shot by the cab, shouting a final sarcasm, Mr. Mounteney bellowed return insults from the window until a sharp turn in the village street hid the slim figure of his retreating rival from his eyes.

Then the driver turned the debilitated cab-horse round and induced it to follow. And as the cumbrous vehicle slowly moved out of sight, Robina, beside herself with indignation, clutched Perto by the sailor collar of his blue serge jumper and shook him with right good will.

"How dared you tell such falsehoods, you wicked boy?" she gasped.

"How dared you, if it comes to that?" retorted Perto, and Robina, releasing him, groaned and staggered backwards, thunder-stricken at the appalling truth. Then Perto's expression of mischievous triumph changed. He began to say that he didn't mean anything, but his sister turned pale and red, and burst into tears.

"I say, don't!" begged Perto, edging near her.

"Oh, how could I be so wicked?" wailed Robina. "And what a dreadful day I'm having for my birthday! And it's going to be worse still—I feel it in my bones! . . ."

Perto edged closer.

"What put it into your head to make up such a buster—all about an adopted great-aunt a hundred and ten years old!" he added as Robina wrung her hands. "You did it frightfully well! I half believed the old thing was upstairs all the time!"

"Eating beefsteaks and potted lobster and doing Mandow's Exercises and skipping!" said Robina coming from behind her apron to deal Perto a glance of scorching indignation.

"Well, you like those things to eat, and you skip before breakfast and stretch your muscles with those Mandow things," pleaded Perto, standing on one leg as his habit was when abashed. "Jolly!" he exclaimed as a motor-horn tooted and a large red Rolls Royce car whizzed by. "I wish I had a car like that! Why—look there!—it's stopping at our door!"

The car had, in fact, been checked at the green gate. It was a landau-limousine of the newest and most expensive kind. I must explain that petrol was procurable by His Majesty's lieges at this early period of the War. And from the seat beside the liveried chauffeur descended a large, beaming short gentleman in a fur-lined overcoat, and from the body of the machine, with the short gentleman's assistance, descended a thin, active lady, carrying a large bouquet of magnificent hothouse carnations. Together they advanced up the narrow garden path, shedding smiles on all around them, and immediately a loud, resounding knock, not only double, but of the polyanthus type, made Laburnum Cottage vibrate from the foundations to the roof.

Robina could not speak. She listened with all her ears as Emma, who must have seen the arrival of the visitors over the kitchen window-blind, delayed but the instant necessary for the whisking off of the blue apron that covered an embroidered white one, before she rushed to admit the visitors. Then there was a good deal of tramp-

ling in the passage, the parlour door was violently wrested open, and announced in Emma's most important tones as "Sir Geoffry and Lady FitzGorringe," the large couple smiled themselves into the room. Sir Geoffry, who had left the fur-lined coat in the hall, proved a portly, long frock-coated, buff-vested, gray-haired, white-spatted gentleman without it. Her ladyship, crowned with a vast toque trimmed with a whole spangled Hamburg fowl, and covered with yards and yards of white silk veiling, and wearing a gray silk dust-cloak over a lavender Bengaline dress, was about as much like a ladyship as anything Robina had ever imagined.

"Have we *really* the pleasure of seeing Miss Robina Grayson?" this large lady began, holding out her hand and smiling more than ever. Then her smile faded and her eyes grew less twinkly and nice. "No, we haven't," she said condescendingly shaking her head, and sniffing at her huge bouquet, "but possibly you little people are relatives of hers?" and she looked hard at Robina.

Her eye was so compelling that Robina found herself nodding and smiling before she knew it.

"We are all the relatives she has got in the world!" she said, as the delicious perfume of the carnations floated to her expanding nostrils.

"These are for her," said the Lady FitzGorringe, laying the splendid bouquet on top of the albums ranged in a methodical circle on the shiny centre-table, and sinking into an Early Victorian armchair like a collapsing feather-bed, "and I hope—and Sir Geoffry hopes!—in fact, we both hope—not only as Mayor and Mayoress of Plashingford, but as a pair of friendly private people—that she will allow us to present them personally, and express our congratulations at the same time!"

And again her eye was so unconsciously compelling that Robina once more found herself nodding and smil-

ing; and then, before she could stop herself, saying quite in Lady FitzGorringe's own tones:

"I'm *sure* she would be *quite too* delighted to see you if she *could*. But she can't!"

"Can't!" echoed Lady FitzGorringe rather sharply. "Why can't she?"

"Surely," said Sir Geoffry, "she could stretch a point—under the circumstances."

"She—she has been stretching points all the morning," said Robina rather desperately, searching about for something to say. "And since the two gentlemen with the notebooks went away—they came for the papers and quarrelled all the time——"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Sir Geoffry, "the child must mean that Mounteney of *The County Indicator* and Ticking of *The Plashingford Trumpeter* have already been here!"

"They have, and since Mr. Mounteney and Mr. Ticking went away——" said Robina with her heart thumping in her throat, "Miss Robina Grayson has been——"

"Exhausted . . . I quite understand!" said Lady FitzGorringe sympathetically.

"Done up. I know what you mean!" exclaimed Sir Geoffry, and Robina added:

"I won't say she's not been quite herself, because she never really was herself, you know! but much less like it than previously."

"Now *do* explain yourself, if you *don't* mind!" said Lady FitzGorringe. "For you really are a *most* mysterious child. Or perhaps this little boy could enlighten us. He looks intelligent." She smiled on Perto winningly as she spoke, and the glitter that Robina dreaded came into his round black eyes. A big lump in Robina's throat checked all utterance. Through a deafening noise in her ears—which she discovered to be the beating of her own terrified heart—she heard Perto talking and

talking and caught scraps of lobster and underdone beef-steak, with references to Mandow's Physical Culture, linked up with Little Miss Muffet, the Skipping Rope Hornpipe and Britannia Ruling the Waves. Before he had finished Lady FitzGorringe was breathless with interest and astonishment and Sir Geoffry had said, "By George!" numberless times. Then the dreadful ordeal ended. Lady FitzGorringe exchanged a look with her husband, pulled down her yards of veil and rose up magnificently saying:

"It is a *great* disappointment to Sir Geoffry and myself," and the whole room seemed full of white and gray silk and lavender, "but *under the circumstances* we *could not dream* of pressing our claim. Give these carnations to Miss Robina Grayson with our *united* good wishes and congratulations (which are already written on this card)"—she indicated a large card which poked out from among the flowers. "If she is *able* to take carriage exercise, we should be *happy* to place a vehicle at her disposal. Our place, 'Pawley Park,' is supposed to be worth seeing." She beamed at Sir Geoffry and Sir Geoffry beamed back. "The house is pure Tudor, in excellent preservation: the Jacobean hall-carvings are considered unique—and the orange-trees in the orangery were brought from Hong-Kong two hundred years ago. If Miss Grayson is kind enough to come, perhaps you will come with her?" She smiled at Robina and Robina smiled in return.

"She couldn't go anywhere without me!" she said brightly.

"Dear me!" said her ladyship.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Sir Geoffry.

"She wouldn't be alive and getting these lovely flowers on her birthday," said Robina boldly, "but for me!"

"How extremely interesting," exclaimed Lady FitzGorringe, putting up a spying-glass. The gleam of her

eye through the polished crystal seemed to compel Robina to fresh utterance.

"Nor she wouldn't have had the King's letter from Buckingham Palace if I had not written to tell him that I would be—I mean *she* would be ten years old—I mean a hundred and ten years old to-day!"

"WHAT an extraordinary little girl!" exclaimed Lady FitzGorringe, looking at Sir Geoffrey, whose eyes seemed popping from his head.

"Twentieth Century, by George! and with a vengeance!" cried he. "And so you mean to tell Lady FitzGorringe you had the conf—the blessed nerve to write to His Majesty out of your own head?"

Robina's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, do you think it was very presuming?" she cried, piteously.

"No, no, child!" said Lady FitzGorringe, moved to pity by Robina's pale, imploring face. "It was quite, *quite* natural when Miss Grayson hadn't anyone else to write for her."

"It was not for yourself you wrote, anyhow," said Sir Geoffrey with a fat, creamy laugh, "and when you touch your own century I hope there will be a little girl at hand to put in a good word for you! And the response to the letter was very gratifying—very gratifying indeed!—and the intimation that was conveyed to me with regard to celebrating the occasion by a semi-official call, and a few congratulatory words and a bunch of flowers (the other aged lady having received musical honours on *her* anniversary), was very gracious, extremely gracious! I suppose Miss Grayson is aware that the King is visiting the Plashington Convalescent Soldier's Hospital to-morrow afternoon? Now if she would allow us to arrange for her to be present in the Main Ward at three o'clock punctually, when Royalty passes through—and if after being presented—she could

be induced to repeat her recitation—by Royal Command, you know—ha, ha! and wind up with the dance—there's a piano there and my wife is an excellent accompanist, it would be gratifyingly received, I'm sure!"

"Splendid, Geoffry! WHAT an idea!" chimed in Lady FitzGorringe. "Then that is settled," she continued, beaming at Robina and rising out of the Victorian armchair like a vast expanding balloon. "We shall send the carriage for Miss Grayson at two o'clock punctually. *Urge* upon her the necessity of being ready—but of *course* she is sure to realise the *importance* of the occasion. Please say we shall expect her to bring *both* her young relatives—refreshments will be served in the Matron's Room *after* the Royal departure. For the King will take afternoon tea with Sir Philip and Lady Nunbury, he dines and sleeps to-night at Nunbury Abbey—about three miles from here—of *course* you know the Abbey. Lady Nunbury plants a young tree on every such occasion, and *this* will be a chestnut, the last was an oak. Pleased to have seen you! Come, Geoffry! Pray remember us to Miss Grayson!" added Lady FitzGorringe. She pressed Robina's cold, damp fingers with a yellow suede glove, ribby with rings, remarking, with another beaming smile; "How *enviably* cool you are, and in such weather!" Then drew her voluminous dust-cloak about her and prepared to precede Sir Geoffry out of the room.

But Sir Geoffry was bidding a genial farewell to Perto, and the sense of remissness in this respect went home to Lady FitzGorringe:

"Really, I had forgotten this little fellow!" she exclaimed, enveloping in her yellow suede glove the small and rather grimy hand released by her husband. "Good-bye, my dear little boy, and thank you for your *most* interesting information. We shall expect to see you and your sister on Thursday at the Hospital."

"She's not my sister," said Perto loudly, as though

suddenly possessed by a spirit of contraction. He continued, as Lady FitzGorringe raised her glass and scanned his countenance: "I'm her uncle—that's what I am!"

"Her uncle! Bless my soul!" exploded Sir Geoffry.

"Good gracious ME!" shrieked her ladyship. She bent nearer to examine Perto more closely, and the boy said daringly:

"Not her common uncle either. Her *great*-uncle! That's what I am!"

"My *dear* child! You CAN'T be!" cried her ladyship with another shriek.

"Bless my soul! don't contradict the boy," cried Sir Geoffry.

"Geoffry," said Lady FitzGorringe, in a deep bass voice laying her glove on her husband's coat-sleeve, "I *must*. His statement is *wildly* impossible."

Her objection seemed to rouse a spirit of defiance in Sir Geoffry.

"Impossible! Why?" he puffed. "Don't see, for my part! . . . If this young lady's grandfather's brother has a young wife with young children, why shouldn't——! No, that wouldn't do it. . . . Try again! If this little boy's elder brother happens by any remarkable chance to be the grandfather of this little girl, you have the thing in a nutshell!"

"Geoffry, I have *not*!" said Lady FitzGorringe indignantly. She tapped her foot upon the floor and surveyed Perto with a freezing stare, adding: "And what is more, I decline to!"

"You won't accept my solution," said Sir Geoffry. "Not even if it were proved to you," he held up his left hand and ticked the sentences off on the fingers, "that this boy's elder brother (being the middle-aged offspring of a very early marriage of his father, who being left a widower with a grown-up family took a young wife to soothe his declining years)—could be a grand-parent?"

"No!" said Lady FitzGorringe stoutly.

"Lor' bless my soul! how obstinate you women are!" exclaimed Sir Geoffry. "Why, the thing's as clear as mud!"

"Bosh!" said Lady FitzGorringe.

"Philippa," said Sir Geoffry, losing his temper, "I am dashed if you shall say bosh to me!"

But her ladyship said it again, as the gray silk dust-coat and the lavender silk gown preceded the portly frock-coat, gray trousers and white spats out of the room, and the dispute as to whether Perto's elder brother could be a grandfather was continued through the hall, and all the way down the garden-path, and did not end at the automobile. For Sir Geoffry got inside with her ladyship to have it out; and when the big car slowly glided away, his gesticulating fist was flourishing perilously near the large veiled hat that was trimmed with a whole speckled Hamburg. And as the couple were rapidly withdrawn from sight, Robina cried:

"What on earth made you say such a thing, you story-telling boy?"

"I dunno," said Perto, in a breathless tone, "unless she made me!"

Next moment found him rubbing a very red ear and staring at a bunch of magnificent carnations that lay upon the carpet. The parlour door had slammed behind Robina, and before Perto's slapped cheek and boxed ear quite stopped smarting and humming the hall-door slammed too.

Rushing to the window, Perto was just in time to see Robina, crowned as to the head with an aged straw hat that had been set apart for garden wear, but jacketless, gloveless, and wearing her schoolroom apron and house slippers, run out down the garden path and out at the green gate. The straw hat could not be seen over the top of the garden hedge, though Perto strained his eyes,

always short-sighted and recently weakened by German measles, to catch a glimpse of it. Wildly excited, the boy threw open the parlour window and scrambled out, but only got to the green gate in time to discern a vanishing speck that was undoubtedly Robina, turning off at the angle of the road that led, not to the village of Mold End, but out of it into agricultural and unknown country.

IV

We are not constrained to remain at Laburnum Cottage with Perto, who had begun to suffer from a sense of sin, or even to accompany the acutely repentant Robina on an expiatory pilgrimage upon the road that grew longer, and harder to travel, the nearer she drew to its end. We may, if we choose, attend the errant footsteps of Shackleton-Peary, who slipped out of the house upon Robina's heels, and unseen by her, wormed himself through the green garden-gate, and, trotting, tail held high in air, or galloping with the splendid bushy appendage horizontally extended behind him, followed the retreat of the ankles his teeth had so often tried.

He quite approved of the resolution taken by Robina, and whether he was aware or not of the direction in which her steps were leading his, he certainly hurried along as though he were certain of a motherly welcome at the end of the journey. A finger-post at the upper end of the village, which had informed Robina that it was three miles to Nunbury, had given place to another finger-post at crossing road-corners that said: "To Nunbury Abbey, 2½ miles." The houses left off happening on each side of the road, and some minutes after hedges with unripe haws and bunches of blackberries that were only partly black, edging waving fields of yellow corn or fields where the corn was cutting; or vast spreads of paler stubble whose

grain had all been shaved by the horse-drawn reaping machines, had replaced orchard fences and garden railings, Robina met a pair of tramps. And the man tramp, in a dusty old black tailed-coat, velveteen trousers and carpet slippers, was wheeling a perambulator, and smoking a pipe; and the woman, a frowsy bundle of garments topped with a sulky face that was shaded by a broken-rimmed black straw hat, was toiling under the weight of an immense bundle of rabbit-skins mixed up with others whose previous inmates had certainly mewed and caught mice.

The man passed Robina with a sidelong look out of an eye that was red-lidded and bloodshot. He coughed rather ostentatiously and the woman stopped.

"There's a nice little lydy," she whined, "for a pore starving creeter to meet of a summer's day! 'Aven't you a copper or two about you, deary? Feel in your pockets and see!"

"I am afraid I have nothing about me but postal orders," explained Robina, with laborious caution.

The man left the perambulator in the road that from a muddy one was rapidly becoming a dusty one, and Robina smelt the smell of beer, getting stronger and stronger as he approached.

"Show us what you've got, pretty deer!" pleaded the woman, showing a set of dreadfully broken teeth in what was meant to be a coaxing smile.

"Ware cops!" said the man, looking first over one shoulder and then over the other, "too many o' the blueys about 'ere, for that lay."

"I'll be careful, 'Enery!" said the woman with a leer at the purse Robina had reluctantly drawn from her pocket.

"They came this morning from father and Aunt Ethelberta," she said, unfolding and exhibiting the crackly blue papers respectively stamped 7s. 6d. and 10s. 0d.,

"because it was my birthday. Nurse sent a shilling, and if you can give me change, I shall be pleased to give you twopence out of that."

But the woman shook her frowsy head, and the man ostentatiously turned out ragged pockets. How and where were two poor starving unfort'nits to get coppers to give in change? he demanded so indignantly that Robina jumped and dropped the shilling. The man instantly picked it up, rubbed it on his trousers, bit it, and extended it to his companion in a very dirty palm.

"This is wot we're asked to give chynge for!" he sneered, turning up a broken red nose as far as it would go. "A duffer bob! A flash deaner, swelp me!" He frowned at the breathless Robina, snarling: "Why, if I was to show this 'ere to the police, they'd pinch yer—and I don't know as it ain't my dooty to 'and yer over. Ketch 'old of 'er, missis!"

At the command the hot, dusty hand of the frowsy woman gripped Robina's slender arm with unpleasant tightness.

"Oh! do let me go!" pleaded Robina, who might have been braver had she felt less tired and gritty; "I haven't done anything to the shilling. It's just as Nurse sent it. I'm sure! Give it me back and I'll throw it away where nobody will ever find it! Why bother the police when they are so busy just now?"

The beery man looked at the frowsy woman and his reddened left eyelid twitched.

"Woddyer s'y, old donner?" he asked. "Give the kid a charnst, shall us, or not? There's a nice deep pond side o' the road about 'arf a mile on. I could drop this 'ere mag in"—he glanced relentlessly at the shilling lying in his palm—"and nobody 'ud ever be the wiser."

"You'd better let 'im," the frowsy woman said, squeezing Robina's arm unpleasantly. "An' if you'll tyke good advice you'll show 'im them flimsies in yer purse. Pre'aps

they're duffers too, the dollar an' 'arf an' the 'arf skiv, an' think of the trouble they might bring you in."

The words were alarming, but Robina did not believe that either her father or her aunt would send Postal Orders that were not real ones.

"Oh! thank you, but I'd rather keep——" she had begun breathlessly, when her purse vanished out of her hand. . . .

"Charnce it and leg!" she heard the man say, and her arm was released with such a spiteful shove that she stumbled and fell upon her knees in one of the few puddles that had not dried. When she picked herself up, rather bruised and sobbing a little, the beery man with the perambulator and the frowsy woman had made such excellent use of their walking powers that two diminishing black specks upon the whitening high-road represented them to their victim's eyes.

v

"I believe I've been robbed," said Robina, indignantly, and was going to stamp with rage, when something bounced through a hole in the hedge beside her, something soft rubbed against her, and something sharp nipped her instep. To her terror on looking down she recognised Shackleton-Peary, a little muddy in some places and rather dusty in others, but full of playfulness, and more than willing to bite.

"You horrid cat!" said Robina severely, removing her ankle from the neighbourhood of the enemy. "How did you get here?"

Shackleton-Peary purred as much as to say, "In the same way as you did!" and throwing himself luxuriously on his back in the road where it was dry, exhibited the round black patch in the centre of his dazzlingly white

Waistcoat, possibly as a hint that he was tired and would prefer to rest.

"I can't leave you," said Robina, "and I can't go back! at least not until I've been where I want to get to—so you'd just better get up and come along!"

But Shackleton-Pearry yawned and declined to get up.

"I'll just have to carry you, then, you horrid thing!" said Robina after a feeble pretence of abandoning the rebel. She stooped and made a gingerly grab at the cat, who instantly converted himself into a thorny ball of resistance.

And then—Robina was conscious of hearing a musical sound that was a great deal pleasanter than the too-too-toop of the motor horn that is most familiar to our ears. It was something like a bell and something like a gong. But she did not connect it with the idea of getting out of the way, until the large dark blue Rolls Royce car that had bell-gonged came swooping round a curve in the road, the exact centre of which was occupied by Robina and the cat.

"Kling-a-ling, *Bong, Bong-ling!*" bell-gonged the large blue car, and Robina tried to dodge out of the way and induce Shackleton-Pearry to do the same, with the result that the cat went one way and the child the other, and in trying to avoid the child, the chauffeur went over part of the cat.

There was a piercing feline yell from Shackleton-Pearry. The large Rolls Royce car, making a beautiful double curve in the dust on the wrong side of the road, stopped at the footpath edge. The upper part of a brown-bearded, middle-aged officer in a red-banded field cap with gold braid about the peak, and red tabs on the collar of his khaki jacket, leaned over the open top of the landau-body, and a tall, active, handsome young officer, dressed almost exactly in the same way, jumped down from the front of the car where he sat with a khaki-

uniformed chauffeur beside him, and came striding down the road to where Shackleton-Pearry with all his beautiful fur soiled with dust and mud, sat with all the bumpiness knocked out of him, holding up a crushed forearm from which trickled a little stream of blood.

"A bad job, poor pussy!" said the tall young officer in a pleasant voice as he stooped over the sufferer. "If no worse damage is done, you're lucky," he added, rubbing the cat's head. "And he looks too lively though I don't know as much about cats as my wife does."

"Nunbury!" called the bearded officer, and Robina saw that two other officers sat facing him in the body of the car, "Nunbury!"

"Sir!" answered the young officer, ceasing to stoop and becoming perpendicular.

"Any serious injury?" asked the clear authoritative voice of the elder officer.

"Nothing, sir, I think, that a decent vet. couldn't put right!" called back the young man. He was returning to the car when:

"Don't come back. I am coming to you!" said the bearded gentleman, and the side-door of the Rolls Royce car opened before the khaki-uniformed chauffeur could reach it. And the middle-aged bearded officer stepped out.

Robina had an instant of doubt as to whether she had not seen him somewhere as he walked over briskly and actively to join the little group of three. He was slender and not at all stout, stooped slightly and leaned upon his walking-stick, surveying the girl and the damaged cat with full, bright, very blue eyes, the bluest Robina thought to herself, that she had ever seen. He said in a clear agreeable voice, smoothing his pointed brown beard with a sunburnt hand that wore a massive signet-ring:

"I agree with you, Nunbury, as regards the vet.

there a competent person in the neighbourhood, do you know?"

The officer addressed as "Nunbury" shook his head doubtfully.

"Not in the immediate neighbourhood, sir. But on the outskirts of Plashingford there's a quite clever fellow, M.R.C.V.S. and all that sort of thing. We send for him when anything's wrong at the Abbey stable or on the Home Farm."

"Very good!" said the bearded officer. Then he added: "I think we have a spare tea-basket in the car. If you will kindly tell Morton to empty it of its fittings we will carry the cat to the veterinary's at once. We have plenty of time. It will not delay us."

"Very well, sir!"

The young officer touched his cap, and went back to the car with long light strides. Robina looked up with a sobbing gasp of relief and said to the owner of the blue eyes:

"Thank you ever and ever so much! But won't it cost a—a great deal of money?"

"It is not going to cost you anything," said the officer, looking at Robina very kindly, "except the anxiety of knowing that your pet must suffer something more in order to be made quite well. And—although I can't quite call myself a veterinary surgeon, I am not inclined to think the damage is severe." He stooped down and gently felt the cat's wounded leg.

"Please take care. He sometimes bites!" said Robina, as Shackleton-Pearcy winced a little.

"Does he? Ah, well, I do not think he is going to bite me," said the middle-aged officer, stroking the cat's silky head.

"He never does what one expects," said Robina, "so perhaps he won't! And though I am sorry for him, he brought this upon himself. First by following me, when

he ought to know that cats are expected to stay at home; and then by lying down in the middle of the road because he was tired. Though perhaps what has happened has been for the best," the tired little girl ended, "for I never *could* have carried him as far as Nunbury Abbey."

"Ah, so you were going to Nunbury? . . ." said the officer, leaning on his plain brown gold-banded stick and smiling down kindly at Robina.

"On important private business!" said Robina.

"So!" said the officer.

"The fact is," said Robina, with an impulse to confidence she could not conquer, "that the King is staying there—and I awfully want to see him."

"So!" said the officer with a twinkle in the very blue eyes, tapping one of his brown spurred boots with his stick, "Is that the case?"

"You *would* keep a secret if I told you one, wouldn't you?" asked Robina.

"Certainly!" said the gentleman. But he added, "Before I give you permission to tell it me I must ask you to make quite sure that it is your secret, and no other person's. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Robina, "but it is my secret, really. It's about a letter I wrote to him—to the King—days and days ago, telling him that the ninth of this month——"

"That is to-day!" said the officer.

"That to-day would be my birthday," continued Robina, miserably, "and that it would make me a hundred and ten years old."

"So!" said the officer, and the way he uttered the word made Robina feel as though icy cold water was running down her back. His face was terribly stern, and his full blue eyes shone like cold sapphires. "And what induced a young lady to play a vulgar practical joke," he added, and his voice was freezingly cold, "upon the

person whom, next to her father and mother, she should most honour and respect?"

"I never thought of its being a practical joke," faltered rueful Robina. "We—Perto and me—were sent down here to be icerlated after German measles—have you ever had German measles?"

"Possibly. I forget!" said the officer.

"They're horrid things," went on Robina. "And it was so lonely—and Miss Twigger is the stiffest old person you could possibly imagine—and her cat—that's the one you ran over—kept biting our legs. And my birthday was coming, and I felt as if I couldn't bear myself—and then there had been all that fuss over old Mrs. Shakerly the week before—and it was only putting one little extra stroke in front of one and a nought—and that's how it happened!"

"And that's how it happened!" said the officer. His voice was clear and stern, but his blue eyes twinkled.

"It wasn't till the envelope with the red crown and the typewritten letter from Lord Stamfordhurst—whoever he is," said Robina tearfully, "that I really understood what an awful thing I'd done, and then I could have lain flat down and died! But I hadn't a chance. With the awful men from the dreadful newspapers calling, and asking questions—and you can't imagine how inquisitive they were——"

"I think I can!" said the officer smoothing his brown beard, and his blue eyes were really laughing now.

"And then, what with the Mayor and Mayoress—Sir Geoffry and Lady Fitzgorringe coming with united carnations and a bunch of congratulations——"

"Did they? Ah, of course!"

"I mean united congratulations and a bunch of carnations," hurried on Robina. "I felt awfuller and awfuller. And whatever the King did in the way of punishing me, couldn't be much worse than hearing somebody inside

myself telling me all the time without stopping how disgracefully I'd behaved."

"I can imagine that," said the officer. "And do I understand that when we ran over your cat you were on your way to Nunbury Abbey?" His mouth looked stern under the brown mustache, but his eyes danced and twinkled as though diamonds had been mixed up with the sapphires. "Going to make a clean breast of it, eh?"

"Yes, I was!" blurted out Robina.

"Plucky at any rate," said the officer, as though to himself. "And honest. H'm!"

"Would you mind telling me," asked Robina, "supposing you have ever been to Nunbury—is it a very ancient place?"

"I know the Abbey," said the officer, "and it is certainly of very great antiquity. There is a Saxon keep, for instance, that dates from the reign of Athelstan."

"Keeps were called keeps because people could be kept prisoners inside them, weren't they?" hesitated Robina.

"The hypothesis is ingenious," said the officer gravely, "but I cannot pronounce it correct. However—supposing it to be so?"

"I asked because, if I have committed High Treason, the King might have me dungeoned there," said Robina, desperately.

"I understand," said the officer, "but I do not for a moment believe the King would deal with you so severely. He has a reputation for humanity which he has generally endeavoured to deserve. . . . Was it because you expected to be imprisoned in Nunbury Keep that you were bringing your pet cat along with you?"

"He isn't a pet. He's a perfect beast and bites ankles till you're tired of life!" burst from Robina. "And I didn't bring him. He just came without being asked—and when he got so tired that he wouldn't walk any

farther I was going to try and carry him—when your car ting-a-linged and only one of us had time to get out of the way!"

"I understand perfectly," said the officer. "Now," he added, as his younger companion came quickly back with a light cane hamper and Shackleton-Peary without protest submitted to being shut inside, "do you not think you had better go home, or allow me to drive you there, as we are passing through Mold End. The King may not now be at Nunbury Abbey, though he certainly dines there this evening—and to have so long and hot a walk for nothing would be discouraging, to say the least. Moreover the true state of affairs may perhaps be known to the King by a kind of accident, and he may give instructions that no further notice is to be taken of what was after all, merely a silly childish freak!"

Robina shook her head.

"He would know I was sorry by my having come to own up, whether he was at home or not. The other way he could only guess. And you're very kind, and I'm awfully obliged—and it will be a long walk—and of course I shan't get any tea—and Miss Twigger will probably send me to bed without supper, though it is my birthday! But I think, under the circumstances, I'm doing right."

"Then I will not further seek to dissuade you," said the officer, drawing off one of his brown dogskin gloves, and feeling in his right front pocket. "By the way, do you speak French?" he asked.

"No, not quite," said Robina, trying to be honest, "though I can say three verbs and some of the vocallubary."

"You speak French quite sufficiently for my purpose, thank you," replied the bearded officer. He drew out a tiny green enamel memorandum-book with something in flashing red and white stones on the cover, and using a thick pencil-case that was yellow like gold, penciled a few

words on a blank leaf of the little book. "You will find Lady Nunbury at home I am certain. Before you mention your wish to see the King, ask to speak to her and hand her this." He tore from the memorandum-book the leaf he had written on, folded it, pencilled something on the outer fold and handed it to Robina. "Now, good-bye, my child, and good luck attend you!" he said in his pleasant voice, and touching the gold-braided peak of his red-banded khaki field cap, turned and walked back with the younger officer, who carried the tea-basket, in the direction of the blue Rolls Royce, by which the two other officers who had been inside were now standing. Then as the tea-basket was carefully stowed in front by the officer who had carried it, the bearded officer with a word or two to the other members of his party, got in, followed by them, and chuff-chuffed away in the direction of the village Robina had left behind her.

We will not describe the rest of the walk. The distances on the finger-posts kept shortening until one said, "Nunbury. To Hopleaf 6 m.," and Robina knew she was at her journey's end. The great gates of the South Lodge opened at the top of the village street, and they were of much gilt wrought iron, between pillars of marble stained with red and yellow and mossy green lichen supporting heraldic beasts that ramped over emblazoned shields of arms.

"A child in an old straw hat and untidy 'air an' a muddy frock, and walking in as if the place belonged to her," said the gate-keeper's wife indignantly to the gate-keeper, who wore his best livery in honour of the Royal visitor, and was assisted in his duties by a couple of very retiring and modest-looking youngish men, who were attired in garments similar to the gate-keeper's, but were in reality what he would have called "tecs" from Scotland Yard.

"She said she brought a message for Her Ladyship as

was give 'er by the officer with a short brown beard and blue eyes who was being driven in the big car along with three others," explained the gate-keeper.

"Lor'! to goodness me!" said the gate-keeper's wife. And she hurried to look over the pots of pelargoniums and the muslin blinds adorning the back window, just in time to see the old straw hat and muddled frock vanish round the sweep of the newly-gravelled drive.

That drive curled in the shape of the letter S through a wonderfully beautiful shrubbery, ablaze with beds of Japanese lilies, monbretias and tall cockscombs, dahlias and hollyhocks in wonderful colours, towering clumps of plummy grasses, and masses of clematis flowering in purple and crimson and white. Beyond was a vast park where herds of deer grazed or lay under giant oaks and beeches. And the Abbey rose up from the middle of splendid terraced gardens whose fountains were spouting columns of falling water from wide basins starred with blue water-lilies and white ones, and tenanted by great golden-scaled, red-finned carp.

The first impression of the house was its immense number of tall marble-mullioned windows; the next, the grave beauty of its lofty front of creamy lichened stone. It was in the shape of a half-square and seemed to have chimneys of every shape that chimneys could be built in, the high pillared portico being in the centre of the main block of the house, so that the wings jutting out on either side were like arms held out to welcome the arriving guest.

The arriving guest felt very small and muddy and dusty and tired, as she advanced between the many-windowed wings and timidly climbed the low wide steps that led to the great hall door. . . . It stood open, and inside the outer hall, which was paved with black and white marble tiles, a vast porter dozed in a great carved and painted and gilded sedan-chair that, large as it was,

fitted him quite tightly. The porter wore a vast gold-buttoned crimson waistcoat, and gold-striped trousers and a frockcoat of dark green, and he snored, as did a Great Dane who was lying on the wide rubber mat outside the open door, his heavy black-and-gray jowl on his great gray paws. He rolled a red-rimmed eye at Robina, and the hair bristled in a ridge along his spine as he uttered a low rumbling growl. "R-worrf!" said the Great Dane.

"Good doggie, then!" began Robina. Then she jumped, for out of the hall poured an avalanche of toy Japanese spaniels and white Pomeranians with Royal blue ribbon bows on their silver-belled collars, and the yapping and tinkling and barking that ensued would have waked the Seven Sleepers, let alone a stout porter after a heavy early dinner.

VI

The porter grunted and got out of his chair, but not so quickly owing to his heavy dinner, but that two mild-looking men in plain dark blue livery with gilt buttons and black trousers, arrived upon the steps before him. . . .

They did not appear to listen as Robina explained to the porter that she had brought a note for Lady Nunbury. But they heard, for they were there to hear. Then the porter said wheezingly, for he was troubled with asthma:

"You can't give that there note to ME, d'ye say?" and when Robina replied that she was afraid she could not, the porter heaved a heavy sigh and touched an electric gong near his elbow, and the glass doors of the inner hall flew open and two of the tallest footmen Robina had ever seen with powdered hair and long coats of emerald-green laced with silver, crimson plush breeches, white silk stockings and buckled shoes, stood side by side upon the threshold. . . .

Four more footmen rather younger than these, each pair exactly matching in height, were ranged upon either side of the Indian carpet covering the polished walnut floor. . . . Their six pairs of eyes, all superciliously fixed upon Robina, made her feel less shy than inclined to laugh.

"What is it, Mr. Jimpson?" the left-handed man of the tallest and biggest couple inquired, apparently of the stout porter, whose asthmatic breathing Robina could hear behind her.

"Brought a message for my lady," said the porter over Robina's head. "With a story as smooth and as pat as you please that the paper is to be delivered by bearer to my lady's own hands and not to nobody else's!"

"Mr. Chix shall decide," said the footman who had spoken, "whether the bearer is exactly the kind of cooriosity Her Ladyship is haccustomed to receive even on hordinary hoccasions?"

"Net quite," said the other tallest footman, superciliously. "Net quite, Mr. Minns."

"Whet is it?" said one of the slimmer, younger footmen, looking down his nose at Robina. "A gipsy's brat or a tramp's kid?—name it, Mr. Biles!"

"I should be inclined to say a beggin' letter," put in the footman who matched the last speaker, "if we was in Barkly Squaw. Not bein', cawn't say, Stiles, my deah fellar!"

This footman was evidently esteemed a wit, for an approving smile appeared upon the large, rather pasty faces of the other five.

"Country hair stimulates Wix, desh me if it don't!" said the first speaker, Minns, admiringly.

"Meanwhile," said the footman who matched the brilliant Wix, "the question is waitin' to be decodied by bellot. Wich is the appropriate ticket to pin on the

article? Young middle-class runaway or himmature 'ighway cadger?"

"Hi should be inclined to say the fermer," returned Mr. Wix.

"Young runaways—especially the female ones," put in the porter wheezily, "being a good deal sleeker in their looks and smother-spoken than trapesin' tinkers and sech!"

"Sorry," said Mr. Minns, "to contradict an apinion expressed by a chara'ter bearin' a simpular weight and importance in the family to Mr. Jimpson's. But with the heddacation now give in Board Schools to the dust beneath your feet, Grammar goes for nothing!"

"You may hev' the Best Blood in Hengland a-biling in your veins—desh me if you mayn't," said Mr. Wix, "and be without a single haitch to your name, or a fragment of grammar to call your own."

"Simularly," pronounced Mr. Minns, "you might be busting with parts of speech and general hinfermation, and be actially descended from the lowest circles!"

"My opinion is," said the porter, breathing heavily, "that no person, in these here days at least, is to be judged by Chin."

"Brayvo!" exclaimed Biles and Stiles applaudingly. "Jimpson for hever!"

"These 'ere Himperial 'Oenzollern 'Uns," pursued Mr. Jimpson asthmatically, "as 'ave set Europe by the years and laid best part of the Continong in regler wrack an' ruin, an' dropped bombs from Hairships on the 'umble and 'igh, are uncommon clever at training Spies to 'elp 'em play their War Game. 'Accordin' to what I've read, they begin to teach 'em young, and they use both sects for their purposes. Suppose—I only say suppose!—we 'ave 'ere a German Spy?"

"Desh it, Jimps, preaps we' ev!" exclaimed Mr. Wix, and it seemed to Robina that the six large pale footmen

grew even more pallid under their powder. There was an instant of appalled silence, broken by Mr. Chix. He wiped his large face with a snow-white handkerchief and said, breathing heavily:

"Speaking strictly in the character of a Clawss Three man I am of apinion—and my catemporary, Mr. Minns—likewise——"

"'Ear, 'ear!" said Mr. Minns eagerly, and Mr. Chix resumed:

"We are of apinion that the honus of haction in this matter stric'ly divolves upon our juniars. Mr. Biles and Mr. Stiles, you 'ave bin called upon simpulary with Mr. Wix and Mr. Tibbits to quit private service for the Service of your Country. Even before you lay aside the 'andsome livery you 'ave adorned in favour of the hunpretentious khaki of the British Soldier, it may be that a opportunity for distinguishing yourselves 'as been laid in your path." The speaker pointed to Robina and retired with the majestic Mr. Minns towards the upper end of the hall. Mr. Wix and his contemporary making no attempt to follow them, remained in the foreground, leaving Messrs. Biles and Stiles to grapple with the situation.

"'Ope she don't carry no bombs, by any chawnce!" breathed Mr. Stiles to his companion.

"Same heah, dear fellar!" returned Mr. Biles, with very pronounced uneasiness. "My opinion is—'ere's a job for Scotland Yawd. There's plenty of 'tecs on the premases, and for me and you to sile our 'ands, would be 'ideously hinfra dig!"

"Brayvo!" exclaimed Stiles. He beckoned hastily to somebody outside, and through the glass doors leading to the outer vestibule came the two quiet-looking men in the plain dark blue livery. Two more had appeared at the upper end of the hall whither all six footmen had now retired in rather a huddled bevy, when a splendid curtain

of gold and blue and crimson, hanging beneath a wide archway of carved Indian ebony, suddenly split into two, and the figure of a young and lovely lady stood in the opening, against a background of blazing steel.

VII

"What is the matter?" the lady asked in a voice that was clear and sweet and a little chilly, and as she spoke the scared group of footmen scattered like a flock of gaudy macaws. "Who is this little girl? . . . She has come here with a private message for me," she repeated as Mr. Minns faltered a confused explanation, "a message which she is expressly charged to deliver to no one else! For what reason then, was she not admitted? Why has she been made an object of suspicion? Why, will you be good enough to tell me, was I not informed?"

She turned kind encouraging eyes upon the shy Robina, and without waiting for the abashed Mr. Minns or any of his comrades to volunteer an answer, she walked swiftly over the Indian carpet and taking a hand that might have been cleaner but for Robina's tumble in the mud, led her through a pair of double doors set in a high doorway on the left-hand side of the hall, and as the doors swung to behind them and a long lovely room spread away as though it could never end. . . .

"Now," said the Countess of Nunbury, releasing her light cool clasp of Robina's left hand, "now give me the message you have brought."

For all answer Robina unclasped a hot and clammy right hand, showing the short crumpled spill of paper that had been hidden there, and said with more brevity than elegance:

"This is it!"

Lady Nunbury's delicate white fingers with their

gleaming pink nails and sparkling clusters of jewels, took the little scrap of paper and unrolled it daintily. Then the deep gray, black-lashed eyes Robina (and many other people) thought so lovely, bent upon the paper that was covered with small neat handwriting, and looked up with a flash of quick vivid interest and surprise before they dropped to it again. Then resting upon her knee the hand that held the message, Lady Nunbury stretched out the other, and drew Robina to her, saying:

"You—most—extraordinary—young—person, let me look at you again! So you're the Oldest Inhabitant of Mold End—the venerable person aged one hundred-and-ten—whom the Mayor and Mayoress of Plashingford were commanded to call upon." Her beautiful gray eyes twinkled with laughter, though her mouth kept steady at the corners. "Poor Lady FitzGorringe. What a shock she must have had when she found out the truth!"

"She—they didn't find it out!" said Rosina, crimson to the tips of her ears. "I—pretended the old lady was upstairs in bed."

"My dear . . .!"

"I told stories," went on Robina desperately. "I had told them to the two gentlemen who came to ask questions for *The Plashingford Trumpeter* and the other newspaper, and then it seemed as if I *couldn't* leave off even though I wanted to. And Perto—that's my brother Rupert!—caught it—like—like German measles, and began telling stories too. Awful ones! He said he couldn't help it. And that made me feel that unless I could clear off the lies by confessing everything and taking the consequences—Perto would be ruined for life by my example!"

"I understand!" said Lady Nunbury softly, and her eyes did not laugh any more.

"So I set off," said Robina, "and the man with the pram and the woman with the rabbit-skins took away

my purse with my birthday postal orders and Nurse's shilling——"

"Did you tell that to the gentleman who gave you the paper for me?" asked Lady Nunbury.

"I forgot, things were so whirly," said Robina. "But he couldn't have helped me to get the money back, could he?"

"He can do a good deal!" said Lady Nunbury, smiling.

"He makes you feel, when he tells you to do anything, as if you'd got to," said Robina confidentially. "I think it is something in his eyes, or perhaps it's his voice. I'm not sure!"

"I am going to do something now that he told me to do," said Lady Nunbury, rising. She moved with her smooth gliding step to an electric bell-button and touched it twice, and a discreet-looking person, white-haired, in black, with a silver chain round his neck, appeared at the summons. To him Lady Nunbury gave some directions which Robina did not hear. She was looking about the long, light, lovely room with its moulded and carved ornaments, and ancient hooded fireplace, its glorious pictures, set in the carved panelling, its wonderful antique furniture, the marvellous Oriental china that loaded the cabinets and shelves and the glowing tapestries that covered the upper part of the walls that were spanned by a coffered and painted ceiling with the date 1588 under the heraldic device crowning the shield that was carved upon the huge central beam. And then the door opened: the silver-chained groom of the chambers returned, preceded by Mr. Minns and Mr. Chix, who were looking anything but haughty, carrying gleaming trays of silver, and while they stood immovable by the door, supporting these, Mr. Wix (under the supervision of the personage with the silver chain, which ended in a key in his waistcoat-pocket) spread a lovely lace-bordered damask cloth upon a low square Chippendale table, and set upon it dark

blue and gold plates of Crown Derby with silver knives, and one of the gleaming silver trays with a tea service of Crown Derby matching the plates, and a silver Queen Anne kettle steaming over a silver lamp, and dishes containing delicate slices of bread-and-butter and sandwiches of half-a-dozen things.

Last but not least he placed upon the table in a Crown Derby dish a magnificent cake, covered with icing, and having done this the personage in black swept Mr. Wix, Mr. Chix and Mr. Minns from the room with a single movement of his finger, and retiring himself through the door at which they had entered, departed, noiselessly closing the double leaves behind him.

"And now, come and have some tea," said Lady Nunbury, smiling at Robina as she led her to the table, "and tell me if you would care to begin with cake or gradually work up to it through the bread-and-butter and sandwiches, for I am sure you must be famished with hunger." She added as she saw Robina's eyes, which were wistfully fixed upon the cake, growing rounder and rounder:

"The cake is a birthday cake, of course! and the name of the person for whose birthday it is intended is marked on the icing, as you see."

Robina could see nothing else, for the letters of the name, boldly traced crystalised pistachio-nuts, walnuts and preserved violets round the central device of figures were strangely familiar.

"ROBINA GRAYSON

Aged 10.

MANY HAPPY RETURNS!"

was what she spelt out. And having finished spelling she stared at Lady Nunbury.

"Cut it, won't you?" suggested Lady Nunbury.

"But—but——" gasped Robina, "it belong to the other Robina Grayson who is ten to-day."

"There isn't any other Robina Grayson here," said Lady Nunbury, "and the cake belongs to you. I hope the *chef* has spelt your name properly," she went on, putting the long shining silver knife in Robina's hand, "because he is a Frenchman who does not speak much English, and has been called up to join his Reserve battalion at the Front and naturally is rather excited."

"And Mr. Biles and Mr. Stiles and the other two—I forget their names!" said Robina, "don't seem excited at all."

Lady Nunbury smiled.

"Perhaps," she said, "when they have finished their training, they may feel more fiery than they do now. They will certainly be healthier. And we shall have no male servants at all unless those who are too old for Service—but nice maids in livery, and *chauffeuses* instead of *chauffeurs* for the cars. But, my child, you're not eating anything, and I have been commanded to see that Miss Robina Grayson has a first-class tea!"

Well, the lobster and caviare and smoked salmon and cucumber sandwiches were very good, the tea with plenty of thick cream perfectly delicious, but the cake was out-and-out the most delectable item of the feast, and when Robina had had two slices:

"You are to take the rest of this home with you, of course," said Lady Nunbury, "with some bon-bons and peaches and things to share with Perto, who must have been frightfully bored by himself all the afternoon."

Lady Nunbury little dreamed what sort of time Perto was really having. But Robina did not know about that until she got back to Laburnum Cottage.

"I am going to send you back early in the auto-brougham," said Lady Nunbury, "as I have to dress for rather a particular dinner, so you will reach home in

plenty of time. Why, my child, what is the matter? Why do you look so shocked?"

"Because I've done a dreadful piece of forgetfulness," gasped Robina, "and now I've remembered with a rush. Oh, Lady Nunbury, I told you I'd walked all the way here to make a clean breast of the dreadful thing I'd done in writing that letter saying I was a hundred and ten years old instead of ten, to the King, and I've never done what I came to do!" She added: "I believe *now* I shall be too frightened. My legs shake like jellies and my heart jumps like mad."

"You will not be frightened, will you," said Lady Nunbury, in her soft cooing voice, "if I hold your hand all the while you're telling the King your story?"

"Oh, will you?" cried Robina, with a jump of relief. "How good and kind you are. Just as if I'd deserved you to be!" she added ruefully.

Sometimes we want kindness most when we seem least to deserve it," said Lady Nunbury. "Not that I think you don't deserve it, you know! For to have *tried* to atone for a wrong done is half-way towards wiping it out. Now give me your hand and I won't let it go until we're well outside the State Apartments. For we always have them ready when the King comes to dine with us, in case he chooses to stay over night."

"The State Apartments are where the King is?" faltered Robina.

"Where the King is is always an Apartment of State," said Lady Nunbury, as she swept out of the long drawing-room, and through the great middle hall, a tall, beautiful vision in a white cloth skirt with a blouse of delicate white silk embroidered and lace-trimmed, with buttons and sleeve-links of great turquoises matching the girdle that clasped her slender waist.

She led Robina to the Indian archway, and as the gorgeous brocade curtains dropped behind them, Robina

found herself in a long and noble gallery with deep niched and mullioned windows running along the outer side of it, a gallery that had at one time been the cloister where the monks of Nunbourne walked and read their Hours. Now it was an Armoury, and the reddening rays of the setting sun were reflected in such dazzling brilliance from the long rows of suits of armour and the stands of halberds and lances, and the innumerable trophies of weapons upon the panelled walls, that Robina blinked like a sleepy kitten as she was led along the polished boards that were strewn with splendid skins of lion and tiger, bear and bison and other big game shot by Lord Nunbury, in his bachelor days.

At the end of the gallery of armour was a smaller hall with a high domed and painted ceiling, and heavy blue velvet curtains, where were waiting several superior attendants in dark blue coats with brass buttons and black trousers and patent shoes.

After the ante-room came a superb reception-room with portraits of gentlemen in armour with long curls, and ladies with bare necks and powdered heads and wonderful hoop-skirts upon the walls; and furniture just like the chairs and tables in the pictures. Nobody was in the room, except a small rough-haired fox-terrier curled up in a deep bow-legged gilt chair, covered with rose-brocade. He woke up at the entrance of Lady Nunbury and seemed very glad to see her, and permitted Robina to pat him in a very condescending way, she thought, for a dog who belonged to the King. And he followed them through the State Apartments.

The whole of the West Wing was occupied by the State Apartments, and they were grander and more splendid than the rooms occupied by Lady Nunbury, if not quite as pretty on the whole. The library was ninety feet long, lined with magnificent volumes and with a great hooded fireplace.

"I cannot show you the smoking-room, or the Private Cabinet, or the Royal bedrooms," said Lady Nunbury. "But in the dining-room I trust we shall find——"

"The King?" whispered Robina, round-eyed and very pale. "But does he—does he know we're coming?" "Oughtn't we—oughtn't we to send the Groom of the Chambers—you said the man with the silver chain was the Groom of the Chambers—to crave an audience? People crave audiences of Kings in Walter Scott's novels. Or oughtn't we—at the very least—to be announced?"

"We will be announced," said Lady Nunbury, laughing softly. "We'll send Dannie to announce us."

And she softly opened the beautiful carved door of the dining-room, and Dannie, the rough-haired terrier, trotted in, his ears sharply pricked and his tail very stiffly held.

The dining-room was small, but a marvel of the art of the most skilful wood-carver the world has ever known or will know. There was only one picture in this room and that was upon the wall over the low wide fireplace, set in a marvellous frame of flowers and birds and foliage carved by the hand of Grindling Gibbons into the very semblance of life. Light from the stone-mullioned, deep-seated windows that looked out upon a small private garden full of exquisite flowers, fell upon it, and in a moment:

"Oh! Oh! ОН!" cried Robina in a high crescendo of astonished recognition. For the face crowning the ermine-robed figure of a brown-bearded, blue-eyed middle-aged man in a Field Marshal's uniform, sparkling with orders, wearing the splendid collar of the George and seated in a gilded chair of estate against an embroidered panel bearing the British Royal Arms, was that of the officer to whom Robina had told her story on the road to Nunbury.

And the officer was none other than *The King*. . .

It was overwhelming.

It was splendid.

It was awful!

These three sentences convey Robina's sentiments to a hair. Perhaps the awfulness predominated over the splendiddness, but there was no doubt about the overwhelmingness, Robina thought. . . .

"Did you guess? . . . But of course you knew . . . The piece of paper told you . . ." she said, looking at Lady Nunbury, to whom the King had written about a naughty little girl in a battered straw hat and an inky schoolroom apron, who had pretended to be the oldest inhabitant of Mold End, and so proved herself to be undoubtedly the most presumptuous. "Was it because of that you were so kind? . . . and the birthday cake and everything? . . . I . . . really . . . believe it . . ." Robina could not go on. The tears of joy and pride and regret were tumbling down her cheeks. And Lady Nunbury dried them with her deliciously scented cambric handkerchief before she kissed them and said:

"It is true, my dear! I was obeying a command—just as you were when you brought me that pencilled scrap of paper. And I think—and I believe the King thinks too—when next you are inclined to play off a hoax upon anybody, you will remember what a different ending this day would have had for you, if he himself had been less kind. For Shakespeare wrote of the divinity that doth hedge a King, and One Who ordained that Kings should rule, has told us that we are to honour them."

Half-an-hour later, Robina, hugging a giant cardboard box, and carrying a basket of hothouse peaches, got out of the Abbey motor-brougham, and as the liveried chauffeur opened the gate for her and, respectfully touching his cap, wished her good-evening, she came up the path leading to Miss Twigger's front door, and the said

door, opening apparently of its own volition, discovered Perto on the threshold. Even by the hall light he appeared flushed, and his eyes were nearly as round and bright as Robina's.

"Whatever made you go and take yourself off like that," he cried, dancing with excitement, "when the fun was only beginning? Why, we've had three bands here, a Punch and Judy, and a lot of ladies and gentlemen who said they were the Village Glee Club and had come to sing a Birthday Ode, and they came in and took Miss Twigger—at least, some of them did—for the Miss Robina Grayson who is a hundred and ten years old, and said how well she looked for her time of life and regularly sent her into fits."

"Oh dear!" said Robina remorsefully.

"She hasn't done any fitting—not really!" said Perto, "so don't groan. But she might have if the mounted Inspector of Police hadn't come riding up and explained to everybody that the whole thing was a mistake which had been explained to the Mayor of Plashingford and the Vicar of Mold End, and the Editors of *The Plashingford Trumpeter* and *The County Indicator*, to their entire satisfaction. And what more was said I don't know. Only the bands and the Punch and Judy and the Glee Clubbers just melted away. And Miss Twigger tied up her head and went straight to bed, because her nerves had been so jangled. And she's ordered Patent Cereal Food for supper instead of her two poached eggs, perhaps because she thinks it will make her look younger, or else because Shackleton-Peary has been stolen. I don't envy the people who did it, do you, when he begins nipping their feet? My word!—what peaches! Who gave 'em to you—and what have you got in the box?"

The rest of Robina's cake was in the box, and a smaller one exactly like it, with this legend on the top icing in crystallised pistachios, and walnuts, and violets:

"PERTO
AN UNBIRTHDAY
PRESENT."

You may imagine whether Perto revelled in his un-birthday present or not. And Miss Twigger, reassured by Robina as to the ultimate recovery of her beloved cat, consented to eat her poached eggs for supper after all. As to Robina and Perto, and Emma, who had what Perto called a whacking slice of each of the cakes, *their* supper was of unimaginable deliciousness. And you, if you suppose that either of them had bad dreams afterwards, you are mistaken indeed. Both slept like tops and awakened happily, though Robina felt anxious when the newspaper boy brought *The Plashingford Trumpeter* for Miss Twigger in the usual course of things.

"I wonder," she said feverishly to herself, "whether Mr. Ticking has put in all those dreadfully made-up things I told him about Miss Robina Grayson—my finding her deserted and starving on the sands at Lyme Regis and adopting her as a great-aunt and all the rest?"

But Miss Twigger perused her *Trumpeter* calmly, without going into fits, and when Robina at last secured the paper and raced with feverish activity through its columns, not a single reference did she discover there to the venerable Miss Robina Grayson and her predilection for skipping, beefsteaks and potted lobster, and this gave the conscious-stricken inventor of the astonishing old lady cause to hope that *The County Indicator* might prove equally bare of the details so eagerly gathered by Mr. Mounteney. As a fact it was, and whether Mr. Ticking of the *Trumpeter* had lost his notebook on the way home, and whether Mr. Mounteney of *The County Indicator* had sent his cuffs to the wash, forgetting that they were of paper and covered with notes—or whether the Editors of both papers had been advised to suppress the inter-

view—Robina never knew for certain, but something told her that the last explanation might be the most correct one.

The portrait that is in the Grindling Gibbons frame over the fireplace of the small dining-room of the State suite of apartments at Nunbury Abbey has been photographed by a Royal photographer and many copies have been sold. Robina, having saved up her weekly sixpence for a sufficient number of weeks, became the owner of one of these. It was hung up where it always will hang, in her own room at home above the little writing-table where she prepared her High School themes and exercises and later on read up for her qualifying examination for a member of the V.A.D. of the British Red Cross Society.

It may be of interest to some animal-loving reader to know that Miss Twigger received back Shackleton-Peary much mellowed in temper from the kindly hands of the vet. And that old Mrs. Shakerly lived long enough to be personally congratulated by the Mayor and Mayoress of Plashingford, serenaded by three bands and the Glee Club, and interviewed by the representatives of *The Plashingford Trumpeter* and *The County Indicator* on the attainment of her hundred and first year.

VIII

BEAUTY WHILE YOU WAIT

IT'S a good thing to 'ave, but it brings trouble. There was the lady Mother 'ad me christened after being give a couple of orders for the Gallery at Covent Garden by the gentleman where she chared. Loosha of Lam-Her-More was her name—and would she 'ave come to what she came to, if she 'adn't bin beautiful?—miserably marrying the wrong young man, an' going mad in her top notes at Edgar's reproaches—Edgar being the young man she'd throwed over, and 'andsome too, with his deadly complexion and black feathers—till the 'ole 'ouse applauded.

Beauty is beauty an' make-up is make-up, though sometimes the two gets that mixed, you can't 'ardly tell one from the other. But what I will say is—the newest an' most fashionable shape in figgers is not to be reached by 'uman means alone. But with regards to them young persons as you see in the ladies' picture-papers, sometimes without heads, but always leaving off below the knee and might 'ave left off earlier. What I ast is, 'Ow is it done? and at least one solid meal a day being a necessity of Nature, where is it to be put?

I once went for to call upon a Beauty Speshulist at a time in life when my feelings was above my reason, and an un'appy attachment to one above my stations in life led me to long for a fair flower-like face and swan-like busk, an' white hands like one of the lady 'eroines in the

"Penny Romancer." Him having gone for his yearly fortnight's 'oliday an' the other lodgers 'aving dwindled to a elderly gentleman with a wig on the second floor back and a young lady in the Trying-On Department what took 'er meals out, I 'ad the chance of a 'ole day off an' took it.

Madame Claudeen was the Beauty Speshulist I'd made up my mind should 'elp me to win a 'art that elseways would never beat for me, for I'd 'eard 'im tell a friend, another gentleman in the butter, pork, and general provision line, as he should never reely love until he met a maiden beauteous as a goddess of Ancient Grease. Madame 'ad a address in a turnin' out of Bond-street on the third landing up. There were two young ladies in the outside room, pretendin' to be busy when they 'eard a step. They swopped a wink when I come in an' the tallest one she swum languidly over the carpet an spoke to me in a lofty, patronizing kind of tone:

"Did you bring a message?" says she.

I tells her straight I ain't brought no message an I've come on my own.

"Indeed!" says the young lady, sniggering at the other. "We don't attend to clients of your rank in life as a rule," an' glances in a mankle glass as the waves in 'er 'air must 'ave took 'ours to do, unless she slep' with 'er head in a handbox.

"I should 'ave supposed as one 'arf guinea is as good as another," I says, showing 'er a glimpse of 'arf a sovereign I 'ad ready in my glove, 'aving bin paid my quarter's wages of one pound ten and eight only that mornin'. "'Owever, if not, there's other establishments in the West End," and I turns 'aughtily on my 'eel.

"Did you require simple face-treatment, massage, or electrolenses?" asks the young lady, climbin' down from 'er 'igh 'orse, "or all three?" And not knowin' what any

of the things meant, I said I thought all three would be best.

"Madame's charge will be a guinea and a 'arf," says the second young lady.

"In for a penny in for a pound," thinks I, "an' that leaves me eightpence to carry on with for a quarter." But I smiled cold and careless like an' forked out the sovereign. It was an awful sight of money to pay away, but I din't grudge it to be made beautiful.

"Will you 'ave manicure as well, and 'air-waving an' tinting?" asks the first young lady, who'd got quite civil. "Because we employ specialists in both branches." My 'art sank into the soles of my feet when she said as that would come to 'arf a guinea more, but I plucked up courage and said I'd have both if a sovereign an' ten an' six covered the complete course.

"Madame does not make such bargains," says the young lady as spoke last.

"All right, miss," says I, "as I'll 'unt up another Madame 'oo will." An' I bid 'em both good-morning, but they calls me back in a 'urry, an' after some talkin' through a speakin' tube that went through the wall into the nex' room, they took my one, ten, six, an' give me a pink satin ticket scented most lovely.

"Madame is engaged with the Duchess of Dimplemere, the Countess of Crumplehorn, and Lady Longshaw," says the first young lady, "but in 'arf an 'our she will be free to attend to you." An' they give me a red velvet chair, an' I set down an' waited. No duchess didn't come sailin' out of the nex' room, nor no countess, neither; only a greasy young man in a white aperrn, with upright 'air, went in between the pale blue velvet door-curtains, carryin' a tray with a pewter-pot an' a covered tin dish, an' come back without, an' then there was a smell of chops as made me feel 'ungry. An' both of the young ladies put on their 'ats, one after the other, an' went out

to lunch in turns. It must have been a 'our before Madame Claudeen runged a little bell, an' I was showed into the nex' room. It 'ad no second door, and there was no more sign of duchesses an' countesses than of the chops Madame Claudeen 'ad bin eating.

Perhaps it was the rose-coloured blinds an' pale blue velvet 'angin's, but she certainly did seem a lovely creetur in a amber velvet tea-gown cut low in the neck an' short sleeves, though stouter than when in early youth. 'Er face was the loveliest smooth pink-an'-white you ever see, an' she 'ad waves upon waves of golden 'air an' lips as red as sealing-wax, an' large dark eyes trimmed with blue. An' you could see the veins as blue on 'er white skin as if they 'ad bin drawn on it. An' rosy nails as shiny as you could 'ave seen your face in 'em. She smiled at me with a flash of pearly teeth an' gold stoppings, an' I fair opened my 'art to 'er and told 'er I 'ad come to be made beautiful. An' Madame Claudeen made me take off my 'at an' jacket an' turn down the neck of my three-an'-eleven silk blouse, an' put on a cotton dressin'-gownd, an' my 'art jumped into the roof of my mouth as I thought of one, as shall be for ever nameless, comin' back in a fortnight from yesterday to find the humble Loosha beauteous as one of them goddesses of Ancient Grease what he was always talkin' about.

I must say Madame Claudeen knoo 'er business to a tick. First she got a little tin-pot with a sperrit lamp an' lighted the lamp, an' when the water in the pot begins to steam she 'eld it under my nose until I was 'arf b'iled; and, judgin' from the glimp I 'ad of meself in the glass over the shampoo-basin, lobsters couldn't be redder. An' then she rubs my face over with a nice-smellin' paste, an' scrapes the paste off with a scraper, an' then with a thing like a toy garden roller she goes over me from me eye-brows to me chin an' back again, over an' over.

"This," she says, "is to illimilate the 'ard lines of care and soften the fatigued linements to the rounded contoors of earliest youth. When this process is finished we will tint the 'air with our celebrated Flooid Door, an' while it is drying we will apply our wonderful Skin Food."

Took aback is not the word for me when I found Madame an' a young lady she'd called in' to 'elp 'er meant to wash my 'ead before tintin' my 'air with the Flooid Door. But what 'ad to be, 'ad, an' when the rinshing an' towellin' was over they dabbed my 'ead all over with a wet sponge they kep' a dippin' in a green glass saucer, an' brought a tin thing like a chimney-cowl up behind my chair an' puffed 'ot air down the back of my neck until I could 'ave prayed for mercy.

"Now we will apply our famous Skin Food," says Madame, emptying some thick pinky-white stuff out of a bottle into a pink glass saucer, an' she gets a cotton-wool dabber an' dabs me all over. "Smile as little as you possibly can," says she, "while the medium is drying," an' she opens a box full of pink stuff an' takes another bit o' clean cotton-wool and——

"'Old 'ard, mum," I says, as 'er 'and comes my way. "That ain't—paint, is it?"

"Of course not," says Madame Claudeen. "This is our exquisit Bloom of Health, and this," an' she opened a pot of red lip-salve, "this is our Rosy Glow. Do not imagine for a minnit that we employ cosmasticks in this establishment," she goes on, takin' a little bottle of blackin' out of a drawer an' dippin' a brush in it. "Nothink so vulgar is employed in our Course of Treatment, and the effec's we arrive at are those of Nature and not of Art." And as she keeps on a-talkin', she keeps on a-working one as fast as the other—until that lovely complexion of 'ers begins to get a bit streaky an' the lovely blue borders to 'er eyes runs into a smudge, an' I see as she must be forty-five if a day.

Will you believe it, when they'd waved my 'air an' done it up, an' soaked my 'ands an' done my nails with plate powder an' pink paste, an' taken off the cotton dressin'-gownd, and give me the 'and mirror to look in, I could not 'ave believed that face I see in it belonged to Loosha Hemmans. For one thing, I 'ad a complexion as pink an' white as Madame Clauden's 'ad bin when I fust come in, an' my 'air 'ad become a goldeny-brown, with greenish lights an' lovely waves in it. My arched dark eyebrows would 'ave befitted one of the young lady 'eroines in the "Penny Romancer." My lips was a lovely red, an' my eyes was rimmed with blue an' 'ad an appealing kind of languishin' look I never 'ad noticed before. I 'ad only eight-pence left off my quarter's wages, but I was a fair treat to look at. Talk of the goddesses of Ancient Grease! If any one of 'em 'ad as much attention goin' 'ome in the omnibus as I 'ad, she might 'ave bin proud. With a conductor which I 'ope were not a married man spendin' more time inside than out, an' every female passenger ready to bite my 'ead off. My missus was out when I got 'ome, 'aving taken the opportunity of goin' to the theatre, but when the evening's milk come clashing cans down the area steps an' the five o'clock postman knocked with a circular, I begun to compre'end the power of Beauty, for neither of them two men could tear themselves away under a promise of walking out on Sunday, an' when I took in 'is tea to the elderly gentleman with a wig what lodged on the second floor, 'e couldn't 'ardly bear to think of my carryin' the tray, though one as would ring for coals constant an' grumble if you stopped on the first floor with 'arf a 'undred in the scuttle. I took a long time undressin' for bed that night, an' went to sleep with a lighted candle an' a lookin' glass on the chest o' drawers opposite the bed, so as I could gaze on my own loveliness whenever I woke up. But I forgot to wake up, an' when the missus

bell rang I jumped up, 'ad the usual 'asty wash with a bit o' Sungleam Soap, an' run down to light the fires an' get the breakfastes with a happy 'art. The kittle was on the boil when I 'ears a tremenjous ringin' at the 'all door. 'Ow my 'art beat when I drawed the bolteses I never, no! never, shall forget. 'Im as shall ever be nameless 'ad returned unexpected from the seaside in a taxi!

"'Ow are you, Loosha?" says he.

"'Ow are you, Mr. Simms?" I says, smiling an' turnin' my beautiful face up at 'im.

'E give a sort of crowing cry an' 'is eyes got as round as sorcers. . . . I keeps on smiling, waiting for what would come. It come when 'e dropped into the 'all chair an' larfed as if 'e'd kill 'isself, and the cabman what was waitin' to be paid larfed too, an' the milkman an' the early post what 'ad arrived simpultaneous, grinned from year to year.

"What ever 'ave—you done—to yourself—gal?" gasps him as I shall never name.

"Nothink, Mr. Simms," says I, with the innocent kind of smile them "Penny Romancer" 'eroines always 'ad on tap. "Why do you ast me, sir?"

"G—go an' look in the—the glass!" he gaspses.

"Yus, go an' look in the glass, miss!" says the cabman 'oarsely.

"Yes, do go an' 'ave a look in the glass!" says the early milk an' the postman.

There was a glass in the 'all 'at-stand. I give one stare in it—an' when I see my face one mask of smudges—pink an' black an' blue an' white, under my dyed 'air—then I knowed all.

You can buy Beauty, if you 'ave enough money to pay for it—but it ain't the sort to wash.

IX

THE YOUNG MAN FROM MAWLEY'S

THE discreet, gray-faced, sadly-clothed man out of livery answered the touch on the electric door-bell and the modestly restrained knock at the hall-door. An avalanche of dogs, mainly of the fox-terrier breed, poured out of the house upon the plainly but well dressed stranger who stood upon the india-rubber porch-mat with a flat box beneath his arm. A yard of Dandie Dinmont followed, and promptly sat up on end, balancing himself with his heavy splayed forepaws, and showing in the beautiful brown eyes under his gray hair tangles the emotional and sudden friendship that he could not convey by tail-wagging without tumbling over.

"Dear little beast!" said the man with the box, before he even looked at Prynne. And he softly rubbed Dandie under the chin with the point of a well-made boot.

"He may, and do, carry a tradesman's box," reflected Prynne, "but he is certainly no tradesman—not unless my experience of gentlemen is at fault, that is." At least he said afterwards in the servants'-hall that these words had framed themselves in his mind. But all he said was—" 'Ad you any appointment with her ladyship, sir? She is particular engaged to-day."

"I am a traveller," said the young man who carried the box, "in the service of Messrs. Mawley, orchid-growers, of Blittingdon, Sussex, and happening to be in the neighbourhood upon business, and knowing that her

ladyship was a fancier"—he waved his hand in the direction of the imposing rows of tropical houses which, with their stove-flues smoking vigorously, rose in recently painted immaculateness at the lower end of the shrubby lawn—"I ventured to call. Some country neighbours of her ladyship's have already favoured me with rather extensive orders, but I have here"—he tapped the box invitingly—"some samples of bloom that have not yet been submitted to any purchaser. It is unfortunate that her ladyship should be so much engaged. However. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders, straightened his hat, tucked his box more firmly under his arm, and nodded good-day.

Prynné wavered. "To tell the truth, sir, a domestic event of the nature of a wedding is in the wind. In fact, it takes place to-morrow, and as I happened to 'ear this morning, that, through an unaccountable negligence on the part of the gardener who have the care of the tropical 'ouses, a whole row of her ladyship's most prized and lovely finger-glass specimens had been discovered to be nipped most cruel by setting in proximity to the glass, pre'aps I ought to mention to her ladyship that you have called."

"Please yourself," said the stranger agreeably. He walked into the hall, threw an appreciative eye over the Jacobean carved screen and the great sculptured marble fireplace, and waited immovably, hat in hand, while Prynné knocked at the drawing-room door.

"I wonder whether I ought to have gone round to the tradesmen's entrance?" wondered this young man, glancing at the box. He became aware of the humming activity of an unseen household on the verge of a wedding as he stood in the entrance of the domestic hive. Scattered on the Turkey carpet and on the black-and-white marble lozenges of the pavement were sheets and crumpled balls of silver paper, fragments of sealing-wax,

trails of cut and knotted string. Piled on an armorial chest were cardboard boxes and parcels large and small. Every moment the swing-door leading to the servants' quarters and tradesmen's entrance would open, and a heated maid or an under-footman in a striped jacket would come and add to the pile of parcels, the pyramid of boxes, and vanish again.

"Wedding presents," murmured the young man who had come from Mawley's. "Damn 'em!" he added, and bit the longest hair of his moustache. He could smell the wedding-cake that stood upon the great sideboard of that jealously-shut-up dining-room, in and out of which hired assistant-waiters in white aprons and cooks' caps were flitting. The whole house reeked of the sacrifice that was perhaps to be. He cautiously climbed the Jacobean oak staircase with his eye, knowing that the bedroom and boudoir of the bride-elect were upon the second floor at the end of the corridor. Perhaps she was at this very moment locked up in those rooms weeping and calling for her Young Lochinvar. Young Lochinvar felt a lump rise in his throat at the mental picture.

All this while Prynne did not return. When at last he emerged from the drawing-room it was with an eye emptied of all knowledge of the young man with the box. An insistent voice followed Prynne and dragged him back, breathlessly expostulating.

"Yes, my lady; two, my lady. I'll tell Walker immediate, my lady." Then he fled up the Jacobean staircase like a hunted ghost.

And directly afterwards, with a little trill of happy song upon her rose lips, kicking a mass of tissue-paper before her with the points of her pretty bronze shoes, and dragging an empty cardboard box after her, whose metal clip had entangled in the lace of her petticoat frill, came the bride-elect. Her gay, pretty eyes encountered those of the young man who held the box, and a wireless

message passed between them. She grew japonica-scarlet; he became, underneath the tan of Shorncliffe and Aldershot, almost pale.

His swift whisper leaped after his lightning glance of recognition: "Don't call out, Ermie! I'm here, as I said I'd be. Will your mother recognise me—with this moustache?"

Her face dimpled into laughter. "Not in the least—she couldn't. It's so red and spiky and unlike your tiny little black one. What sticks it on?"

"Diachylon—or something else that gives me the lock-jaw," he mumbled with a rigid upper lip. "Look here! Are you going to be plucky and fight for your happiness and mine, or go through with to-morrow's—tomfoolery?"

"Harry! Don't be so—tempestuous!"

She gasped, and her white hands fluttered up to her heart. There was a magnificent square emerald set in brilliants on the engagement finger. To-morrow the wedding-ring with a still more costly keeper would replace the emerald, set in its stead by the hand of a husband whom she did not love, if she did not respond to this young man's appeal.

"You have only to slip upstairs to your room, pack a tiny bag, put on a fur motor-coat, hat and veil, and get out. Then you must cross the park to the lodge near the Charles's oak. A little way down the road there's a closed touring-car waiting. That's mine, and the chauffeur has a red rose in his buttonhole. I'll join you directly afterwards, as soon as I get turned out. I've been hanging about the place for three days waiting my chance. Then I had the notion I told you of in my letter—the notion about the orchids." He jerked the box. "Fourteen of your mother's choice specimens in this box. I paid her second tropical-house gardener a hundred jimmies down to swear the April frosts had blighted 'em. Thundering scoundrel, isn't he?—not that I have any

right to complain. Oh! isn't it a thundering confounded shame that I'm only my uncle Broad's nephew, a poor beggar in a Hussar regiment, with only seven hundred a year besides my rotten pay to keep up a beggarly little title with. If I'd the Duke's strawberry-leaves round my hat now, I should have been able to knock at your father's front door like a decent gentleman and say, "Look here, sir, I've come to marry your daughter, not her money!" instead of sneaking in as I've done. What is it? Somebody coming downstairs? All right."

Alarm had leaped into her face as the decent Prynne came smoothly hurrying downstairs, followed by a French maid in black silk, with elaborately piled-up hair, who carried a milliner's box and a jewel-case. In the box were a coronal of orange blossoms and a veil of marvellous, cobwebby, old Malines that had belonged to a murdered Empress. And the case held family diamonds belonging to the man who was to marry Ermyntrode to-morrow.

She knew that as she passed into the drawing-room, the door of which the young man held respectfully open. The vista afforded was of brocade-upholstered furniture, some of it supporting female friends and relatives; the rest encumbered with wedding presents, yet partly enshrouded in tissue-paper. Her mother, a large, stately woman, with an overflow of figure and three chins, welcomed back the sacrificial lamb with an enfolding embrace.

"Dearest, where have you been hiding? You have been wanted frightfully, more than once."

"I have only been in the hall talking to the man who called about some orchids."

"From Mawley's? Almost providential, when one recalls the tragedy of last night. Where is the person? Tell Prynne to show him in."

"You have not time to see him, surely? Had not Prynn better appoint another day?"

"My dearest, the day is to-morrow. And I have fourteen Venetian finger-glasses to fill, thanks to the wicked frost last night. You don't imagine that I shall grudge expenditure that is to make your wedding a brilliant success?"

Ernie was kissed again, enfolded again. All the women present murmured admiration or cooed approval. Prynn showed in the young man from Mawley's, Orchid Growers, of Blittingdon, Sussex. He passed over scattered squares of tissue-paper to the tribunal of her mother's judgment. The box was opened, the damp cotton-wool removed from fourteen replicas of the fourteen frost-shrivelled orchids. Feminine gasps and gurgles of delight attended the exposition of each wonder.

"And—the cost? You would be content to make some reduction if I agree to take all that are here? We are largely supplied from our own houses, but—we entertain to-morrow, and some unexpected need may arise, some unforeseen contingency may have to be met. You quite comprehend me? I feel sure you do. You look intelligent."

"*I hope,*" thought the young tradesman, as he respectfully stood beside the open box upon the table, "*that the unforeseen contingency may be of my bringing about!*" He looked as stupidly intelligent as he could, and said that the price of the boxful was only ten pounds. She took so long in beating about the bush of her determination to give no more than five sovereigns that he nearly yielded to the desperate impulse to offer them as a gift. But he controlled himself, and bowed over her ladyship's cheque like a pattern tradesman.

~ "Perhaps," suggested her ladyship, who secretly re-

joiced over a wonderful bargain, "you might like to see *our* orchid-houses before you go."

His eyes suggested who should be his guide. The bride-elect thought she needed fresh air. Indeed, her head ached a little. She would pilot the young man from Mawley's as far as those gorgeous glazed exotic temples at the bottom of the shrubbery-garden.

"But the heated air inside! My darling child must be careful!"

Darling child meant to be. She would run and put on her things, and the young man would wait in the hall. He opened the drawing-room door very respectfully for her, and she passed out, so haughty in her condescension that she gave him quite a smile. Then, with a *frou-frou* of silk linings and a twitter of laughter, she shot up the steep oak Jacobean staircase, under the grim or smirking faces of ancestors in wigs and ruffles. He waited without his box.

Presently she came down in a sable motor-coat and toque, with a white silk veil over head head. She carried a tiny bag, hidden by her sleeve, and her cheeks were poppy-red. The young tradesman opened the hall-door. They went out into the still golden light of an April afternoon, and turned up the long path that led through the shrub-garden, the bride-elect walking a little in advance. The moment they were at a safe distance from the house she showed him her bare left hand. The emerald ring had been left, in an envelope addressed to the giver, on the writing-table in her boudoir.

"Then you will—you will!" he gasped, overcome by the reality of his triumph.

"Goose!" she said, "as though you didn't know I would. This gate leads into the park. I'll run you to King Charles's' oak—for what?"

"For a wedding-ring!" said the young man, pulling off his red, spiky moustache and throwing it into a bed of

scarlet anemones, and capturing the little travelling bag.

"One, two—off!" she said, and darted away, he after her. But they passed singly and with the utmost decorum through the lodge gates, and a little way down the road they found the motor-car waiting, whose chauffeur wore a red rose in his buttonhole.

"Good for you, Richards!" said the owner of the car, as he handed in his prize.

"Yes, m'lord," said Richards, touching his cap.

"My portmanteau in?"

"On the roof, m'lord," said Richards.

"And the hamper, and the tea-basket?"

"Inside, m'lord."

"Drive like the deuce, man."

"Where to, m'lord?"

"Folkestone. We'll get there in time to be married at a nice little church I know by special license early to-morrow morning, and cross to Calais by the next boat."

The chauffeur touched the lever. The automobile slid noiselessly away down the long white road. She cried because she had left her Pom behind, and mother, and everybody, but not as she would have cried if she had had to go back.

X

"BLEACH"

"**W**E could, 'aving got the mare safe in our hands," said the nondescript personage in the tight-knee'd riding breeches, contrasting oddly with his serge reefer coat, his checked leather-peaked motor-cap, Scotch heather-mixture rig-and-fur stockings and lace-up boots, "we could enter 'er for one or two of the minor May events, say Folkestone and Salisbury, but for her being so blooming dashed well known."

"It's 'er colour, dark chestnit, with a white blaze on her face and the off-fetlock white too, as stands in the way o' a pair o' needy pals turnin' the honest copper," said the nondescript personage's companion, turning a sprig of greening broom between his chapped lips as he lolled back in the third-class smoker that contained himself, his friend, and a thin hectic young man in respectable Sunday black, with the ostentatiously curly and glossy hair that is seldom seen save on the head of a hairdresser. He smelt of bergamot and shampoo-soap, and was reading the weekly issue of a newspaper devoted to the interests of the Trade. In the rack over his head were a shiny bowler, with a new crape band, and a shinier bag of American cloth. And the rat-tail of a dressing-comb stuck out of his breast-pocket.

"Fen narks," said the first speakers, treading on the toe of the man who had replied.

The Doncaster and Liverpool Street Sunday afternoon

train joggled over the sleepers languidly, paused at a small and insignificant station to disgorge two stout farmers and take in one cotton-gloved, red-cheeked servant girl, then with a jerk and a rattle sped again over the iron way. And the young hairdresser, who was of a sensitive disposition, realised that his fellow-passengers were staring at him resentfully.

"Excoose me, sir," at length said the owner of the toe that had been trodden upon, chewing his piece of broom and breathing wheezily over the turned-up collar of a weather-beaten covert coat which had been made for a much bigger wearer, "but per'aps you over'ear'd wot I was a-saying just now to my mate 'ere in joke?"

"About the chestnut horse—the chestnut mare, with the white blaze on her face and the white fetlock, whatever part of the beast that means, for I'm sure I couldn't tell you?" said the curly-headed young man with the comb sticking out of his breast-pocket, looking over the top of *The Coiffeurs' Chronicle and Barbers' Weekly*; "whose colour is too remarkable for the thieves that stole her to profit by their felony? Certainly, I did overhear."

The candid utterance induced an apoplectic alteration in the complexions of his fellow-passengers. As the pace of the locomotive quickened to a rapid wobble instead of a slow joggle, the nondescript gentleman in the reefer significantly let down his window, opened the carriage door, unbuttoned his waistcoat and removed his belt, a stout leather affair with a brass buckle. His companion in the covert coat slipped one large hand into the inner pocket of his garment and withdrew it, wearing an iron ornament of the kind known as a knuckle-duster.

"There ain't a stop now for quite a while, is there, Cuffey?" the nondescript gentleman asked, with an unpleasant smile.

"Not for a while, Briggins, there ain't," responded Cuffey; balancing the knuckle-duster.

"Then, my curly-'eaded young friend," said Briggins, with simple directness, "me and my mate are under the obligation of asking you to step out of 'ere."

"And if you don't step out," said Cuffey, revealing a quantity of uncared-for teeth in a grin that was even more unpleasant than the business smile of Briggins, "me and the other gent 'ere will be under the pyneful necessity of chuckin' you."

"It seems to me," said the curly-haired tonsorial artist, looking rather pale, but speaking with great coolness, "that both of you chaps are making a lot of fuss about a very small matter. What is it to me if you stole the mare or a complete coaching-four of animals of the same description? I'd steal myself, just now—at least I think so—if I knew of anything to steal."

"Ho! you would, would you?" said Mr. Briggins judicially.

"'E only thinks 'e would," said Cuffey malignantly. "'Ere! This carriage is uncommon cold with the door hangin' open." He addressed the young hairdresser. "Are you a-goin' to step out of 'ere or ain't you? That's the question."

"Because our time's too precious to waste," observed Mr. Briggins. And with his friend he truculently advanced upon the intended victim.

"Don't fuss, you have plenty of time before you," said the hairdresser, putting up his hand. "Why should you grudge me an extra minute? Besides, it will be to your advantage. I've rather a valuable trade secret I should wish to place at your disposal in return for all the trouble you're going to, to save a poor bankrupt beggar of a hairdresser who put his all in buying a rotten business, and who had fair made up his mind to commit suicide on this very journey, out of this very train."

"Strewth, and so that's why you took us all a-smiling," said Mr. Cuffey, with reluctant conviction.

"Now I look at you, you 'ave a kind of 'unted desprit look," added Mr. Briggins, perusing the hairdresser's features with interest.

"Suicide's a crime, and you're going to save me from committing it," said the hairdresser briskly; "that's why I am going to help you two out of your little trouble with the stolen mare."

"Her colour's our trouble," said Mr. Briggins gruffly, "and though we could dye her black with walnut juice whisker-and-moustache stain, the stuff runs to a bob for a small bottle, and we want all the money we've got, to put, not on a 'orse's 'ide, but on a 'orse's 'eels."

"But suppose instead of dyeing the beast you were to bleach her?" suggested the hairdresser.

"Bleach 'er like how your young woman does 'er 'air, 'e means," interpolated Mr. Cuffey, nodding at his friend.

"She says she don't do nothing to bleach her 'air," declared the chivalrous Briggins. "She says the strong sunshine at Margit that time I took her on a five-shillin' excursion there and back made it go that yellor mustard colour from dark brown."

"She is quite right about the effect of the sunshine," said the would-be suicide cheerfully, "but the bleach—peroxide of hydrogen is the stuff—has to be put on first, and it's very expensive, the kind usually employed. But the confounded swindler who sold me my little business in Ealing—at Notting Hill, I mean—had discovered a cheap medium, and there's an eight-gallon cask of it now in the little room back of my shampooing-saloon. That cask I am going to bequeath to you two gentlemen, in return for your obliging services. No; don't shut the carriage-door. You promised to pitch me out, and I'm going to hold you to your bargain. First, though, I shall take off my boots, in case I change my mind at the last minute and kick so as to hurt you."

The young hairdresser put up his foot on the carriage-seat and began to tug at a boot-lace.

"'Old 'ard a minute," said Mr. Cuffey, who had been thinking noisily. "You 'aven't tipped us the address o' that little crib o' yours in Nottin' 'Ill."

"Areca Crescent, Number Thirty-eight," said the hairdresser, fighting with a knot. "And the name over the shop is 'Rickarby, late Milching.' I'm Rickarby, and I shall be late in a minute, I hope. Come, are you chaps ready?"

"Don't rush us," said Mr. Briggins. "Spare 'arf a mo' to tell us 'ow we're to get that barrel o' bleachin' flooid, an' 'ow we're to use it—when we get it. Don't leave two feller-men in difficulties what 'ave befriended you."

"Call for the barrel with a truck, and say I sold it to you before I died," said the impatient hairdresser. "As to the mare, sponge her all over carefully with the medium, and let her dry in the sunshine—unless you bungle the job she'll turn golden."

"And so will our luck," said Cuffey, joyfully spitting his piece of broom out at the carriage-window—"least-ways, if we don't bungle the job, as you say," he added, "through not bein' proper 'airdressers."

"You ought to be able to manage by yourselves," said the impatient hairdresser; "but it's a thousand chances to one your lack of experience will ruin the appearance of the customer—I mean the animal. It isn't *every* hairdresser who's a good bleaching-artist, let me tell you that. Why, it took me five years to attain my present pitch of proficiency."

"And now you're a-going to spoil yourself by being thrown or jumpin' out of a railway-carriage when going at express speed," said Mr. Briggins, who had, despite the entreaties of the hairdresser, shut the carriage-door. "No, young feller. You 'ang on and live long enough

to git back to London and bleach the mare for us; she's Colonel de Crosier's 'Bloodstone'—(I thought you'd jump at that!)—what mysteriously disappeared out of 'er special van-'orsebox betwixt Lewes and Bath, a regular crock of her colour, with a white-painted face and fetlock bein' substitooted in 'er place—her being entered to run for the Somersetshire Stakes and carryin' a pot o' money."

"An' she's now in a little stable behind a friend's public-'ouse at Churton," said Mr. Cuffey bitterly, "eatin' her heard orf to the tune of seven an' sixpence a day, and bringin' two honest investors to misery and starvation, because of her colour making 'er so remarkable, an' her description being known. But bleached to a nice light canary colour, like Briggins' young woman's hair, she'll be a bit of fair all-right, and so will you."

"The train's stopping," said the hairdresser gloomily, "and but for you it might have been all comfortably over with me now. Well, I'll live just long enough to oblige you two——"

"And afterwards you shall make away with yourself," said Mr. Briggins, flushed with generosity, "in any way you please. There! Don't say we're not acting fair by you."

"I won't," said the curly-haired young man, as he crowned himself with his crape-adorned bowler, reached down his black shiny bag, "and now——"

The train stopped.

"And now good-bye," said the curly-haired young man, stepping nimbly to the door, opening it, and getting quickly out. "This is my station. Here! Guard! Porter there!" he shouted, "call a constable! I give these two men in charge for being concerned in the theft of the mare 'Bloodstone,' the property of Colonel de Crosier, and also for having threatened to murder me. If I hadn't bluffed the scoundrels with a pretence of being

on the point myself of committing suicide, they'd have thrown me out of the train, I believe."

"We would," said Mr. Briggins malignantly, "and I wish we 'ad 'ave done it."

"It ain't a fair cop, what I call," snarled the indignant Cuffey. "It's a low, mean, dishonest take-in."

"You'd better be careful what you say," said one of two large constables. "I warn you everything'll be took down and used against you."

"I told you the truth when I said I was on the verge of bankruptcy," said the smiling hairdresser, when he had supplied an inspector with his genuine address. "So I am, but I shan't be there long, thanks to you. There's a reward of three hundred pounds offered for the recovery of 'Bloodstone,' this gentleman tells me, and I rather fancy it'll come my way."

He winked upon Messrs. Briggins and Cuffey pleasantly.

"Ta-ta," he said, "much obliged. Good-day!"

XI

BONES!

ONE week-end house-party had motored away, the men masked like conspirators, the women veiled like house-maids' brooms enveloped in cobwebs. The next batch was not due until Saturday. One, two, three, four days of *tête à tête* loneliness for Her and for Him.

He had, with the inane persistency of the speeding host, remained upon the doorstep even after the tuff-tuff of the last motor had grown thin upon the ear. She had retreated into the Jacobean carved-oak hall, on the strength of which they had paid eighteen thousand—a bargain, the sleek Haymarket agent said, omitting to mention whose—for this desirable country residence. The newly varnished, recently acquired ancestors upon the walls looked at her with such glittering contempt that she lowered her eyes. And then she saw a curious-looking, narrow, long box upon the marble console—or what looked like a long box, enveloped in brown paper and string.

"It must have come by parcel post just now," she said, pouncing on it eagerly. "How frightfully punctual of Taillette et Cie! Just when I wanted something to do, too." She rang the hall bell twice, which meant the Swiss maid upstairs, and began to strip off the tightly tied string. Then a large masculine hand reached over her shoulder and grabbed the parcel.

"Look here, that's mine, you know!"

"Rubbish! It's for me."

"I beg your pardon," He said, with some acerbity; "if you will look at the address you will see my name."

"I don't want to look at the address."

"You've torn it off," he said angrily.

The address being on a label gummed over the knot of the string, she had, in fact, torn it off and tossed it into the fire, which had been lighted because Jacobean halls have a trick of smelling mouldy even on a rainy day in September, and of feeling damp. Now He went down on his hands and knees, grovelling under the console table in a curiously ardent search for it.

"Do get up," she snapped; "you look so awfully apoplectic about the neck and ears, and I can hear you puffing."

He obeyed with unusual celerity. "I'm afraid I *am* getting a little bit crummy," He said, surveying the generous curve described by his watch-chain across a waistcoat of fatally large-patterned tweed.

"Afraid!" She echoed, with a high little hysterical laugh that He had learned, within two years of wedded happiness, to regard as the weatherwise regard the inky cloud-castles bannered with streamers of coppery vapour that presage the bursting of a thunderstorm.

"Look here, my dear," He said, with meekness, "are you absolutely certain that parcel was meant for you?"

"Were you expecting one," She asked, with icy disdain, "of this shape and size?"

"I don't see why I shouldn't be." He was fiery sunset red and breathed through the nose, always a sign with him of impending inflammation of the temper.

"Will you tell me," She asked, facing him, the disputed parcel tucked under one arm, the outraged feelings of a wife palpitating visibly under the discreet indiscretions of her open-worked cambric blouse, and one little buckled patent-leather shoe tapping the shiny bottom step of the Jacobean staircase—"will you tell me what you think—

what you believe—to be inside this?” She rapped lightly on the parcel with the hand that wore his wedding ring and the keeper that had cost him such a thundering lump. Our civilised women are no better judges of jewels than their savage sisters, thought He. Anything that is big enough and sufficiently shining does for all, and they sport a five-hundred guinea string of pearls with a rope of blue-glass Venice beads, and diamond bracelets with Indian glass bangles, the sort of thing the ayahs and low-caste women wear at Lahore. And these are the creatures that prate of sex equality and clamour for franchise! thought He.

“No, I’m dashed if I do!” He thundered suddenly.

She cast a glance of scorn upon him, turned, and swept upstairs to her boudoir. She heard the door of the smoking-room bang, disturbing swarms of Jacobean echoes, as she cut the string of the parcel, neatly removed the brown paper, dropped it into the wastepaper basket, and opened the long box. Then she uttered a cry of triumph and dashed into her bedroom, calling Marie Louise.

“Undress me quick; don’t lose a minute. Taillette has kept her word, and I’m dying to try them on. *Dites-moi done*, Marie Louise, do you think the new-shaped figure will suit my style? Candidly, now, speaking as though you were at confession.”

“It is trying, without doubt, to those ladies who are not tall. But Madame has such grace to carry it off.” Marie Louise was, of course, speaking as if she were at confession. “Madame will look ravishing. Alas! my Heaven, what is this?”

Marie Louise was quite pale as they unrolled wider and wider in her trembling hands.

“Made of webbing, no embroidery, and with such huge wide bones!” gasped her mistress. “And thirty-five inches—forty, if one. What can have possessed Taillette? Put them back in the box at once, Marie Louise. Take

them away to your room, tie them up in the paper, and send them back to Wigmore Street by the next parcel-post. I'll write a letter and say there has been some hideous mistake. No, don't dress me again. I'll put on a kimono and go to bed till dinner-time. Does it rain still?"

"Des hallebardes, Madame."

"You may go. Take those awful things with you, and bring me tea at half-past five."

"Madame has already had the afternuti!"

"I'll have it again, then."

Marie Louise shut the bedroom door noiselessly, and skipped across the boudoir, hugging in her neat black silk apron the long box and its extraordinary contents. She made a grimace of triumph at her own rather plain face in the mantel-mirror, and slid downstairs instead of up, with the air of a feminine Mephistopheles. She was not a bad sort of young woman, but chance had delivered a man into her hands, and he was going to bleed for it. She knocked softly at the smoking-room door.

"Come in," He bellowed. He was lying on his back on a big leather divan, smoking a cigar and studying the pictorial advertisements in a ladies' weekly illustrated paper.

"Monsieur permits?"

"Certainly." He dropped the paper adroitly between the divan and the wall, and sat up with rumpled hair and a heightened complexion, which deepened to tomato when he saw the apron's contents. "A message from Madame?"

"It is but of the box. The box contained nothing that was intended for Miladi. I come but to bring Monsieur——"

He blurted out: "Take the things away. You don't suppose I'd order or wear such things, do you? Send 'em to the devil. Pack 'em back. Put 'em in the fire. Why bring 'em to me?"

She tittered inwardly, for she had not unrolled her apron or opened the compromising box. Now she began to weep; the black silk apron went to her eyes, the box tumbled down upon the Daghestani carpet, and the contents of course, rolled out.

"I beg Monsieur to pardon me. I entreat Monsieur not to be offended. Miladi—Madame—does not know that I brought the box to Monsieur. She commanded me to send it back to the *corsetière* in Vigmore Street, and I cannot write the English address. Ah, heaven! and Monsieur is angry!"

Monsieur said with an uncertain voice, looking at the contents of the long box with a mingled expression of guilt, fear, and greed: "You're wrong, my good girl. I'm not in the least angry. Leave the box with me. I'll pack it up and direct it properly." He added, slipping a sovereign into the unconsciously ready hand of Marie Louise, "And—you needn't mention anything about it."

"But if Madame should ask?"

Another sovereign went to keep the first one warm. And those things in the long box had cost him four pounds ten, and he didn't know whether he would ever be able—able to——

"If Madame should ask, say that the——"

"The corsets, Monsieur!"

"The—a—humphs!"—He could not bring himself to utter the word—"have arrived at their proper destination."

"But certainly, Monsieur."

Marie Louise vanished. He rang the smoking-room bell three times impatiently—that meant master's man upstairs, and look sharp about it—and went to try them on. He ate less dinner than usual that night, and sighed frequently. But even to the wifely eye, which is not always the most flattering medium in which a man may be reflected, he looked less "crummy."

XII

THE MAN WHO LOST HIMSELF

AN ASTRAL EXPERIENCE

I

“**T**HE Great Day,” said Johnson-Williams, one day in the Middle Victorian Era, “will dawn at last.”

“The great day?” I interrogated.

“The glorious Day,” replied Johnson-Williams, looking through the rails of the mahogany partition which divided his desk from mine, like a caged enthusiast, “when every person of intellect and understanding residing in these realms will be found to own himself or herself a member of the Theosophical Society; when Motive Power will be replaced by Psychic Force, and the principles of Mahatmaism will be instilled into the unfolding mind of the smiling infant as it lies across the—in short—the maternal knee; when the Visible world will give place to the Unseen, and the Practicability of a project be determined by its Impossibility.”

“This,” I hazarded, trying to look wise, “would alter the universe materially.”

Johnson-Williams nodded.

“Alter it for the better?” I went on, “or for the worse?”

“For the worse?” echoed Johnson-Williams. “Oh, of course! Yes, for the worse!” He uttered these words

with such sneering intensity that I gathered at once that I had made a mistake. I would have spoken, but he plucked his pen from behind his ear and hurled himself upon the big ledger as though it had been his bitterest foe. I fell to work upon a pile of insurance policies. The clock struck three. The door of the inner office was torn violently open, and the junior clerks shuddered in their boots as the portly form of the Head of the Firm rolled down the central aisle of desks and vanished. An interval elapsed. Young Simpson came out of his little business hutch carrying a gorgeous crocodile-leather travelling-bag. "Saturday to Monday—Brighton," seemed written upon it and on him in large capitals. He paused at the door, listening until his parent's footsteps ceased to echo on the stairs. Then, bestowing upon us collectively what, had he not recently attained to the dignity of junior partner, would have been a wink, he went away whistling. Our working partner followed; one by one the junior clerks dropped away. Cornhill was quieter than usual, it being Saturday afternoon.

"For the worse?" quoted Johnson-Williams derisively, looking at me through the railings again. "Ha, ha! Look here. You're fond of change, ain't you?"

"Change!"

"Excitement? Novelty? Foreign travel?"

I had spent a week at Dieppe two years previously. I spoke of this experience, and admitted that it had been an enjoyable one.

"Dieppe," repeated Johnson-Williams scornfully.

"It is rather far off," I agreed.

"Far off!" repeated Johnson-Williams—I wished he would not repeat! "Suppose that it were possible for you to go anywhere you liked in an instant, without asking for a holiday or buying a ticket? Suppose that it were possible for you to traverse continents and cross seas—to annihilate Time and swallow up Space—merely

by the exercise of your own volition? Suppose you not only found it feasible, but easy, to visit a friend in China at eleven a.m. and to be sitting down to lunch in New York at one-thirty, calling in at Vladivostok, or taking Alexandria on the way home to dinner, would that be the worse for you or the better?"

"It would be most enjoyable," I admitted, "but at the same time a little exhausting. No human constitution could possibly stand the wear and tear."

"If you happened to be a Theosophical Adept, you would leave your constitution behind you," said Johnson-Williams. "Your body would remain at home, or perhaps seated at the office desk, in a posture of reflection, while your soul was really taking a holiday. Take the case of an experienced Mahatma incarcerated in a prison for debt! His corporeal frame would remain in the custody of the law, it is true, but all the time his airy double might be roaming about in perfect liberty and running up fresh bills elsewhere. The subject is an immense one, my dear Pegley. There is absolutely no limit to its possibilities!"

Beads of perspiration stood on Johnson-Williams's brow, and he wiped them away with a shaking hand. It was plain that he was intensely interested in his subject.

"And can you—have you really accomplished all this?" I asked eagerly.

His countenance gloomed over as he replied, "Not exactly; not yet—that is—you see, I have not long been a member of the Society, and it requires a considerable amount of knowledge and plenty of practice to attain to the—the Pitch I have mentioned. One must have time, and my time is limited. Last Saturday afternoon I had really succeeded in concentrating my faculties to an astonishing extent. I felt that in another moment something extraordinary might be expected to happen; but my landlady looked in to ascertain whether I would take

a rasher with my tea or a lightly-boiled egg, and the opportunity was lost. I do not know when it may occur again. But I shall have two and a half days' holiday at Easter." His countenance brightened. He nodded at me again, saying, "Then we shall see!"

"Have any of the members of your particular branch of the Society succeeded in attaining to the necessary Pitch?" I inquired.

"N-no," hesitated Johnson-Williams. "The fact really is, the young people are for the most part actively engaged in business, like myself. But we receive most encouraging communications from older branches from time to time, and we have great hopes of one of our number. If any one of us attains to the Pitch, that one will be Chorley. Chorley is becoming quite an Adept. He is employed as foreman by a well-known distillery company; and the extensive liquor vaults belonging to the establishment afford him opportunities for seclusion and contemplation and self-concentration of a very superior kind. I really wish you would attend one of the meeting of our society and hear Chorley relate his experiences."

"They are——"

"Wonderful!" said Johnson-Williams, getting off his stool. "I am going home now to my lodgings, and if the theatrical young lady upstairs does not particularly want to practise her step-dancing, and my landlady should happen to have taken the children out for the day, I should regard it as quite providential, I assure you."

I asked him to come and lunch with me first.

"Exceedingly hospitable of you, my dear fellow," said Johnson-Williams gratefully; "but I am at present subsisting on a regimen which is more in accordance with the peculiar Aims I entertain than chops. Frugal but nourishing. Wholemeal porridge, enlivened with raw apples, and an occasional charcoal biscuit, with cold water

to wash it down. The gurgling tap of the modern Theosophist is identical with the purling rill of the ancient Pythagorean, if not so nice. And I am careful about having the liquid boiled and filtered, so that no peril of any kind may be associated with the experiment, as the chemical demonstrators say, when they are not under immediate apprehension of a blow-up!"

I admired his self-denial and perseverance, and said so.

"Oh! as to that," replied Johnson-Williams, "when a man has a particular end in view, he doesn't mind a little hardship, more or less."

"And your end is the advancement of Science?" I hazarded.

"Perhaps, yes," said Johnson-Williams, taking off his hat, which he had just put on, and passing his long fingers through his hair, which was of a sandy colour and an upright growth. "But were I to deny that my chief motive is a personal one, I should be wilfully deceiving you."

I looked at him interrogatively. His pale features worked with emotion; he laid his hand—a long thin hand—upon my arm.

"I am about to repose a great confidence in you, my dear Pegley," he said, blushing.

I wondered what the confidence was going to be.

II

Johnson-Williams came round to my side of the desk and sat upon the stool, immediately facing me.

"The desire to travel," I hinted, "was your leading motive?"

"Hardly that," said Johnson-Williams. "I am a matter-of-fact fellow, and this quarter of the globe is good enough for me. If I want to know anything about for-

eign countries I can get 'em up in Maunder's, and add the details of costume and local colouring out of the 'Illustrated Geographical Encyclopædia.' But the enormous facilities for inexpensive and instant communication with relatives or—or—friends residing at a distance, which the attainment of Adeptship would place at my disposal, constitute, I must confess, the special attractions of the Theosophic Cult, from my limited point of view. You may not be aware of it, but I am engaged."

I had not been aware of it, and I hastened to congratulate him.

"She is a young lady of great personal attractions," said Johnson-Williams, blinking at me from behind his glasses, "and, like myself, poor—poor. She occupies, in fact, the position of daily governess in the family of a well-to-do coal proprietor, residing at Merthyr Tydvil. We are both Welsh by birth, and in marrying me she will not be compelled to make any radical alterations in her surname, as far as marking is concerned; for her name is Williams-Johnson—Miss Williams-Johnson. 'Johnson' will have to be picked out, or cut out, of course, and put before the 'Williams'; but the saving in time, trouble and marking-cotton will, as she herself says, be considerable. She is a delightful girl. I have not seen her," said Johnson-Williams thoughtfully, "since I came up to London six years ago. Our incomes being so limited, the railway fare between London and Merthyr Tydvil—even third class—constitutes an effectual barrier between—in short, Gwendollen and myself. But I make no doubt she is as delightful as ever. I do not possess a portrait of her, as photography is a comparatively expensive process. And we cannot correspond as frequently as we would wish, for the same economical reason. Thus, as you will see, the attainment of my object would be, to both of us, a positive Boon."

He got off the stool and went away, but turned back at the door to remind me that the Easter holidays were not very far off. He was cold and reserved in his manner next Monday, and I guessed that he partly repented having taken me into his confidence regarding the young lady at Merthyr Tydvil. For another thing, he was excessively busy, and so walled in, encompassed by, and built up with the ledgers of the firm, that he was less assailable, from a conversational point of view, than a Recluse of the Middle Ages.

And so the days passed over. But on the Saturday afternoon immediately preceding Easter Monday he sought me out in quite a special sort of way, and bade me good-bye almost effusively, for him. His hat slid to the back of his head as he shook my hand, and several volumes which he was carrying under his arm tumbled noisily to the floor. I helped him pick them up, and glanced at the titles. "Ashtaroth Made Easy" was one; "Proofs Positive of the Solidarity of Spooks" another; "The Young Theosophist: an Easy First Primer To The Attainment Of The Occult," a third; "How To Make a Mahatma," a fourth. They were lent, he explained, by his Society. And he shook my hand again before we parted, and thanked me for the sympathy I had exhibited, and added that he felt somehow as if he were upon the verge of a great discovery. I gave him the address of the lodgings where I intended to spend the vacation, and invited him to run down and see me sometimes. He thanked me, shaking his head with a mild kind of despondency. And so we parted.

I spent my Easter holiday, I hope, harmlessly and healthfully enough, and in a style that was in accordance with my comparatively limited income. Upon a salary of seventy pounds, even when buttressed and supported by an annual present of ten, it is possible for a City Clerk to exist, if not to live, and even to set apart a margin

for mild relaxation and sober recreation—of a kind. But enjoyment, fun, frolic, sport, jollification, are quantities to him unknown. In his inmost soul he secretly cherishes the intention of having what is technically known as a High Old Time at some future day, but the date of that day is ever indeterminate. Sometimes it is virtually fixed, and looms before him as a glorious practicability, but before it comes off he may die of old age or excessive joy. For your true City clerk is a sensitive creature. Much chafing of the *os pectoris* against the edge of the office desk has tended to the thinning of the wall which was originally designed to protect the human heart from the slings and arrows which are continually aimed by the world against that citadel of the emotions. But I digress.

In the Village of Hampton Wick, therefore—in the house of an excellent widow who had had long experience in the taking in of the City gentlemen, and could underboil a potato or calcine a chop with any member of her sisterhood who ever stood in list slippers—I passed three days of my vacation. My canoe—a present from an old fellow-clerk, now a well-to-do Manitoban farmer—I had had sent up, and when the dear old river was not too lumpy to be agreeable, I paddled about the quiet reaches between Kingston and Twickenham, or dug my way upstream as far as Shepperton or Molesey. Or I smoked my pipe under the gnarled thorns and budding chestnuts of Richmond Park, and read “Lavengro” over again, or dipped into the jolly pages of Rabelais or Chaucer, and was never dull or dismal until the evening of the very last day. Easter Monday was drawing to a close—I must return to business on the following morning. It had been a wet Bank Holiday, and as the rainy night closed in, and the evil-smelling paraffin lamp was lighted, and the mousy odours of ancient cupboards began to draw comparisons with dry-rot and old mouldi-

ness, and the three stunted pollard-beeches that kept watch and ward over the little weedy front garden threw their distorted goblin shadows on the drawn-down calico blind, I could have wished for some companionship livelier than that of the stuffed grouse under the glass case on the sideboard, or the blunt-nosed red-and-white china spaniels on the mantel-shelf, or the portrait of a lady unknown—in Berlin wools—hung above. As to cultivating the society of my landlady, that was out of the question. I stared hard at the glowing coke embers and glided almost imperceptibly into a smooth sea of reflection. Suddenly its waters became troubled. Before the eye of my imagination up bobbed a sandy head, and I smiled, identifying it as the property of Johnson-Williams. Poor fellow! I smiled again as I pictured him, patiently supporting his holiday upon that ascetic regimen of wholemeal porridge, raw apples, and charcoal biscuits. I wondered whether he had made any progress in the cult of Theosophy? whether he was any nearer to the fulfilment of his Aim than he had been when I saw him last? Did the theatrical young lady continue to harass him by saltatory gambols performed overhead? Was his landlady still persecuting him with assiduous solitudes upon the subject of rashers and lightly-boiled London eggs?

Mph!!

I drew out my handkerchief and flapped it, and glanced towards the window with a developing intention of opening it, for the atmosphere of the room was decidedly hazy. Perhaps the chimney smoked! But the fire burned perfectly clear. It must be that villainous paraffin lamp. My mind, which had been full of Johnson-Williams, discharged itself of its personality.

And in the same instant——

III

And in the same instant the haziness vanished. I leant my head back upon the bumpy chintz cushion of the straddle-legged easy chair. I resumed my train of thought. It brought Johnson-Williams in with the very first batch of passengers. He buttonholed me, mentally, and wouldn't be shaken off. And the room was getting smoky again. It must be something wrong with the register of the grate. Quite a cloud, or, to be correct, a column of nebulous bluish vapour hung in the space between the fender and my arm-chair. I wondered idly at its peculiar shape, which was that of a trunk, bifurcated at the upper and lower extremities. It had, so to speak, arms and legs, and—yes, a head! The legs were getting more distinct every minute. And—it was an absurd idea enough—but they certainly bore a resemblance to the legs of Johnson-Williams, on which he invariably wore trousers of a material which he asserted to be real Welsh tweed, of extraordinary durability and cheapness. And all at once the conviction came upon me, not with a staggering shock, or a chill shudder, but with a sensation of calm unemotional surprise, that in very reality, those familiar garments were standing upon the hearthrug in front of me, with Johnson-Williams inside them.

Perhaps his boots came home to me most keenly. They were of the obsolete spring-sided make, very ponderous of sole, and garnished upon the insteps with little round flat buttons that did not button up anything. I had often wondered whether, like the rest of Johnson-Williams, they had been made in Wales. With a dreamy, pleasurable sense of recognition, I let my glance travel upwards to the black waistcoat, garnished with a nickel watch-chain—from thence to the Navy blue cravat with a little bird's-eye specks of orange on it—from that to a linen

collar with brown horseshoes (Johnson-Williams had always been partial to linen of a pictorial description). This stage led me easily to his chin, and in the same way I scaled his upper lip—a long and steep one—and mounted to his eyes. Then I nodded.

“Good-evening,” said Johnson-Williams, distantly, in both senses of the word, because his manner was constrained and nervous, and his voice sounded faint and hollow as if it came from a long way off.

“Good-evening, old fellow,” I returned. “D’you know, I must have been asleep and dreaming of you when you came in, for I opened my eyes, and there you were, like a vision!” I jumped up and shook myself as I spoke, and glanced towards the cupboard where the whisky-bottle and the soda-syphon stood. It seems so natural to offer a man a drink when he has come a long way to see you. And it was late already. I should probably have to harbour my guest for the night. There was a mechanical trick-bed in the sitting-room. It had annoyed me by the flagrant transparency of its attempt to look like a bookcase, but now it would meet an emergency. There would be bread-and-cheese, potted bloaters, and Scotch ale for supper, and for breakfast—I must talk to my landlady about breakfast.

“I am afraid you are tired, old fellow!” I cried, with sudden concern, for Johnson-Williams had grown strangely pale and shadowy. But as I fixed my wavering attention on him he seemed to revive, and refused my proffer of refreshment with a faint smile.

“No stimulant, thank you, my dear Pegley.” He waved away the whisky-bottle as he spoke.

“After your railway journey?” I urged.

“I did not travel down,” returned Johnson-Williams, “by rail.”

“You walked?” I uttered, aghast; I had forgotten the low state of the poor fellow’s finances. “Walked all

the way from London and on such a beastly evening?"

"One could hardly call it walking," said Johnson-Williams.

How had he been conveyed to Hampton Wick, then? I plunged into the mazes of a labyrinth of probabilities. Had the driver of a Pickford's van given him a life, or a mail-cart man? A basket-seller's caravan was out of the question, because vehicles of that description travel so slowly. How, then? I looked up and uttered a shout of surprise, for Johnson-Williams was gone!

Clean gone! There was no need to look under the table, it was not big enough to hide a full-grown man, and Johnson-Williams was incapable of playing a trick. No; my fellow-clerk had vanished from sight, without employing such means of egress as might have been afforded by the window, the door, or the chimney, which was up to its old games again. There hung the cloud of smoke I remembered noticing before Johnson-Williams had come in. Stay! *Had* he come in? I breathed heavily through my nostrils, and dug my nails into the palms of my hands, as I tried to recall the features of my friend. Then something like a thin stream of ice-water coursed down my spinal column. My heart sat down with a bump, and my hair got up and began to walk upon my scalp, for the face of Johnson-Williams was looking at me from the summit of a hazy transparency, whose shifting outlines bore the dimmest possible relation to the human form. The eyes blinked, the lips moved. He spoke hollowly, as the Man in the Cellar responds to the interrogation of the ventriloquist.

"Do not be alarmed. Compose yourself. Try and think of something soothing. If you were to repeat the Multiplication table, or the rules of Book-keeping, or the principal Articles of the Collision Clause, or the Statute Limitations of Insurance, it might have a steadying effect upon your nerves."

The hollow voice became hollower, his outlines began to grow dim, as with protruding eyes I stared upon him. A thousand wild ideas spun in my brain. Was he? Was I? Were we? Horror! He was beginning to fade before my eyes! He would be gone in another minute!

"Unless you can concentrate your attention on me, my dear Pegley, it is very likely."

He spoke with some asperity, replying to my thoughts as though they had been uttered aloud.

"The fact is—and I only withheld it up to this moment out of a natural reluctance to startle you—the fact is, that I am not myself."

I had been sure of that.

"Your misapprehend me, my dear Pegley," went on Johnson-Williams, putting me more at my ease by the familiarity of his address, and the slight smile which hovered over his long pale countenance, as his familiar figure, spotted cravat, Welsh tweeds, and all began to bloom into view again. "I am quite myself in the more spiritual sense of the word if, materially, I fail to come up to the mark. But with a little practice"—he waved his hand encouragingly—"you will be able to develop me to—in short, to any extent you may consider desirable."

Now I found speech. The truth flashed upon me.

"Then—then you have done it at last?"

"I have done it at last," echoed Johnson-Williams, nodding at me cheerfully. "I told you when we parted that I felt something was really going to happen this time. In a word, my friend, I have attained the Pitch, to the level of which my faculties have been earnestly strained ever since I became a convert to Theosophy. Chorley is nowhere. I have outdistanced every member of our Society." He rubbed his unsubstantial hands and chuckled ghostily. "I seem solid enough at this moment.

But—think of it, my dear Pegley—I am in reality a floating bubble on the currents of Astral Force. A whiff of cigarette smoke—a mist wreath has more actual density. Dismiss me from your mind—I am gone, like a breath from a mirror. Recall me, and I revive. Walk through me—I shall not offer any resistance. Shake me by the hand—you will feel nothing in you own. Ha, ha! I am not a City clerk, but the essence of an office drudge—the wraith of a book-keeper on a salary of sixty pounds a year. Will-power brought me down to Hampton Wick—instead of steam—and without costing me a halfpenny; Will-power will take me back again and set me down upon the sofa in my lodgings at Great Joram Street, whenever I say the word!” He rubbed his hands again and beamed delightedly.

“Won’t you sit down?” I broke in, trying to seem commonplace and natural.

“Thank you, dear boy,” Johnson-Williams returned, “but if you would allow me to—in fact, to Hover, I should take it as a kindness. You have always been so agreeable in your manner, and so frank in your sympathy with my Aims, that I feel perfectly at home already.”

I held out my hand, and he grasped it heartily—at least, he seemed to, and with a full return of confidence in him and in myself, I put his sincerity to a final test by walking through him, taking my pipe and tobacco pouch from the mantelshelf and returning, *via* the same route, to my chair. My mind was so firmly fixed on him, that he never faltered.

And in the silence of the night, while the red fire’s core burned hollow, and the paraffin in the lamp waxed low, Johnson-Williams told me the rest of his story.

IV

“I shall begin,” said Johnson-Williams, “at the beginning. It will not surprise you to learn, in the face of

the present glorious Result, that in the matter of my attaining the absolute quiet and seclusion essential to the furtherance of my Aim, Fortune favoured me most unexpectedly. This identical morning, the young lady (theatrical, if you remember) who rents the fifth floor (immediately above me) at No. 26, Great Joram Street, was called away to . . . in fact, to stay from Saturday till Monday with an elderly aunt, from whom she has expectations. That in itself was a great piece of good luck. My landlady then, knowing that my claims upon her attention in the way of cooking and so forth, are not urgent, and the rest of the house being To Let—very reasonable terms and clean beyond any previous experience——”

He was standing in a familiar attitude, talking quite naturally. I was sitting on a chair, with my arms folded on the back of it, and my chin resting on them, looking at him intently. For I knew that he would go out like a candle-snuff, if I relaxed the mental strain, only for an instant.

“My landlady took the children,” Johnson-Williams continued, “to a relative at Whitechapel, being anxious, as she expressed it, for a whiff of country air. She left the servant girl in charge of the house, with express orders not to stir out of it until her return at six o’clock. Nor would Jemima have disobeyed her mistress, I am sure, had not an unforeseen casualty—the illness, in fact, of a sister living at Woolwich, obliged her to——”

“I see,” I said.

“She was very much upset at leaving,” Johnson-Williams continued, “though she expressed unbounded confidence in my capability of looking after affairs as general. Her sister’s brother-in-law (a Gunner in the Royal Horse Artillery) fetched her away. I bolted and barred the front door and that of the area, when she had gone, and stuffed up the bells. The field at last was mine.

He struck the table strenuously, but soundlessly, with his clenched hand, and his eyes glowed with triumph.

"I locked the door, made up the fire with damp slack, so as to reconcile the greatest amount of warmth with the smallest amount of blaze and crackle—partook of a light meal—an Australian apple with one slice of brown bread, and washed the whole down with a glass of water. Then I pulled down the blinds and extended myself upon the sofa—head low, arms rigidly pressed to my sides, heels close together—the posture pronounced, on the authority of distinguished Adepts, to be most favourable to the attainment of the Pitch. I set my teeth, closed my eyes, and summoned up all the forces of my Will to assist in the divorcement of my Astral Body from my earthly one. Cold chills ran down my back, a clammy liquid seemed to trickle through the roots of my hair. From the tips of my fingers and the ends of my toes, from every pore of my body, I felt the continuous discharge of currents of Magnetic Force. My respiration grew less perceptible, my heart beat more and more faintly every moment, as my will-power gained in force. Effort seemed carried to the highest pitch attainable, when suddenly volition ceased. I lost consciousness—only for a moment. When I came to myself, I was standing in the middle of the room."

I drew a long breath and said, "Go on."

"My first sensation was one of disappointment," said Johnson-Williams, "the next was one of surprise, that the intense mental exertion through which I had just passed had left me so fresh and unexhausted. My feet hardly seemed to touch the ground when I moved towards the chimney-glass, impelled by the desire of testing, by means of that medium, whether I looked pale. I rested my elbows on the mantelshelf, I leaned forwards and saw——"

"You saw?"

"Nothing at all!" returned Johnson-Williams, with quiet enjoyment. "No image was reflected in the glass. Only a patch of film, a haze dimmed its surface. My first impression was, that the chimney must be smoking furiously. I glanced at the hearth and found that the fire was burning with a steady red glow. I glanced back at the glass then. It gave back no reflection. And then—then my eyes wandered to the sofa—and in an instant I understood, for the sofa had an occupant! On it was stretched a human figure, the figure of a Man, and the Man was—Myself!"

I was getting deeply interested. I tried to say "Go on!" and the words wouldn't come. My mouth was dry.

"I lay rigidly, motionless and without breath, in the posture I had assumed when I commenced my efforts. A casual onlooker would have said that I was dead, a scientific observer would have pronounced me to be in a cataleptic trance. I approached and examined myself curiously. Few persons on this globe, my dear Pegley, have enjoyed so favourable an opportunity for self-examination. If I ever had cherished any vanity, I candidly confide to you—it received its death-blow in that hour."

"Oh, come!" I muttered. Johnson-Williams waved the expostulation away with a gesture of his hand.

"Then," he resumed, "a Thought occurred to me, which drove all minor considerations to the wall. Here was I, newly arrived at Adeptship, freed from my gross earthly envelope, standing in the complete 'double' or *Mayavirupa*, by the side of the body I had temporarily rejected, as though no glorious Experiences waited for me elsewhere. The Barriers that had severed me from the dearest object of my soul were now cast down. The image of—can you not imagine whose image, my dear Pegley?"

"Of the young lady in Wales!" I burst out.

"Quite right!" nodded Johnson-Williams—"uprose be-

fore me. Hurrah! I would start for Merthyr Tydvil without delay."

"Go on!" I cried, breathlessly.

"The intention was no sooner formed than I passed without conscious effort, through the panels of the door, which, you will remember, I had previously locked, and floated down the staircase. My hat and overcoat hung upon the rack in the hall; my umbrella leaned beside them. My first impulse was to put on the first-named articles; my second to rejoice that I no longer needed such material protection from the inclemencies of the English climate. In another instant I was in the street."

v

"I could see," continued Johnson-Williams, "that it was a damp, unpleasant night, but I was not sensible of any discomfort. On the contrary, an airy sensation of lightness pervaded my being, lightness which was so far from being imaginary that with the first puff of raw wind that came round the corner, I rose from the ground, and soared to the altitude of the gas-lamps, where I remained stationary, mingling my astral essence with the trailing wreaths of fog and the yellow beams of vulgar radiance that permeated through them! It was certainly disappointing to find that, try as I would, I could neither ascend or descend, move forwards or backwards, though I cheered myself by the reflection that the astral method of traveling must, like the human method of progression, take a certain amount of time in learning. The question was: How much? Only fifty-one hours remained to me of my holiday. It had taken my ordinary, everyday self a fortnight to acquire, in the elementary sense of the word, the art of roller-skating. How long would it take me to master the elementary steps necessary for the successful transport of my astral body to Merthyr Tydvil?

"As I revolved the problem in my mind, the map of North Central England pictured itself before my mental vision (I have a considerable practical knowledge of geography, as you perhaps have observed), with my native county of Wales snugly tucked away in a southerly corner. Spider-like I projected an invisible filament of Will-power towards Wales, felt it catch, and immediately hauled upon it. The thing was done almost involuntary, but in the same instant I began to move. Eureka! The question had answered itself! Henceforth, when in *Mayavi-rupa*, I wanted to go anywhere, I had only to project my mind before me, and my astral body would follow it as the train follows the engine, or the vessel the towing tug."

The shade of Johnson-Williams paused, drew from its breast-pocket the ghost of a coloured handkerchief, and wiped its brow—from force of habit, perhaps, because there was no moisture there.

I had grown bold enough by this time to mix myself a whisky and soda. I lighted my pipe, too, and as its grateful vapours mounted upon the air, it was a strange thing to know that Johnson-Williams sitting (he was now sitting) in the chair over against me was in reality less substantial in consistency.

"I was now high above the earth," said Johnson-Williams, "and travelling at an immense rate of speed. The night was clear and the stars were shining. Nothing crossed my plane, which seemed to be a single line. Only once I encountered a fellow-traveller."

"A fellow-traveller!"

"A shadowy Form which swooped across my path obliquely at an angle of, I should say, thirty degrees," replied Johnson-Williams, "travelling at a rate which indicated an enormous amount of Will-pressure. I have no doubt he was a Persian Mahatma or an Adept from Thibet. He wore a spangled kind of head-dress, and his

long gray hair and beard floated behind him. His legs were crossed, and his arms folded upon his breast in an attitude of meditation. I bowed respectfully, but felt too shy to speak."

"I wish you could have interview him!" I said eagerly.

"My next experience was quite amusing," said Johnson-Williams. "Imagine a china plate, with a jam tart—one of the puff description, with a spot of jam in the middle—travelling by itself at the rate of sixty miles a second. Yet that is what I saw. Several cocked-hat notes passed me, shooting in opposite directions, projected by opposing currents of Astral Force."

"I should like to know where they were bound for!" I said curiously. "But you got to Merthyr Tydvil in the end?"

"You do right to rebuke me for the digression, my dear Pegley," returned Johnson-Williams good-naturedly. "I am trying your patience, I fear. Yes, I arrived at Merthyr Tydvil. I knew that I was there, when my onward course was suddenly brought to an abrupt close, and I began to fall—quite like a parachute.

"The house of Gwendollen's employer is situated on the northern outskirts of the town, commanding an unobstructed view of what is, generally speaking, a cinderous and smutty prospect. Descending vertically, I alighted on the roof. Tiles proved no obstacle to my airy particles. I sank through them and found myself in a room which, from the character of its furniture and ornaments, was plainly the children's nursery. There were only two occupants—a baby asleep in a cradle, and my—Miss Williams-Johnson."

His eyes sparkled at the delightful recollection.

"Time has not impaired those personal attractions, which, in conjunction with the properties of her mind, first enchained my steadfast affections," he said. "She

was perfectly delightful to look at, without and within. I say within, because in this astral condition I was enabled to penetrate into the recesses of her mind and read her thoughts before they dawned in her (most expressive) countenance. She was thinking about Me"—he hesitated, and looked a little sheepish—"and in such a strain of warm and constant regard and tenderness, that I was quite affected."

"'How good he is, poor fellow, and how he loves me,' she said, without speaking, 'and how long it is since we have met. How long must it be before we meet again—how long before we are rich enough to marry? Ah, think if I were only Llewellyn's wife.'"

"I didn't know your Christian name was Llewellyn," I put in.

"'And we were rich enough to have a little house of our own to live in, and a little servant to wait on us, in some neat suburb of London, not too near the City because of the fogs—they are so bad for Llewellyn's chest—I should be the happiest girl in all the world!'"

"Miss Williams-Johnson must be a *very* nice girl," I thought.

"I knew you'd say so," responded Johnson-Williams, just as if I had spoken. "Then her face clouded over, and I found she was thinking of the miserly old aunt who had brought her up from childhood, and who had died a little while previously, leaving all her property for the benefit of a charitable institution. Gwendollen could not help wishing that the old lady had left just a little to *her*, more for my sake than her own; and then she began to conjure up a picture of me in her mind—to recall my features, one by one, and each separate article of dress which I am accustomed to wear, with the most surprising result! Happening to stretch my hand out, what was my surprise to find that it was coming slowly into view—transparent as yet, but gradually gain-

ing in density and opacity. I was, in fact, undergoing the process of materialisation, just as happened when you——”

“Yes, yes!” I assented hastily.

“With a pardonable feeling of alarm,” resumed my visitor, “I glanced downwards.”

VI

“Downwards.” Johnson-Williams seemed to blush. “It had occurred to me that the earthly and perishable garments in which my worldly frame is customarily attired might not be reproduced upon the—in short—Astral Body. But there they were! It was reassuring to recognise the pattern. In another moment Gwendollen’s eyes turned full upon me. She stared and uttered a slight scream. Now, one of my pet theories, often unfolded to you, my dear Pegley, is based on the composing influence—in moments of intense excitement or mental confusion—of the repetition, on the part of the patient, of a familiar formula of words. From this arose my suggestion that you should repeat the multiplication table in the first moments of your surprise at my unexpected appearance. I see that you recall the instance! Therefore, when I put to Gwendollen the opening interrogation of the Catechism, according to the Book of Common Prayer, generally used by members of the Protestant Church, it was done deliberately and the result more than justified my previous convictions. To the first question, ‘What is your name?’ the dear girl replied hesitatingly enough; but ‘Who gave you that name?’ met with a fluent response, and ‘What did your Godfathers and Godmothers then do for you?’ brought her round completely. With the secret of my Theosophical studies Gwendollen has long been familiar. Therefore it was possible to answer her interrogations

as to how I had come to Merthyr, and in what manner obtained access to the nursery of her infant charges, and so forth, in a very few sentences:

"‘I can hardly believe it,’ said Gwendollen, when I had done.

"‘If you doubt me, my dearest girl,’ I replied, ‘put the truth of my assertions to the test. Give me a kiss!’

"She pursed up her lips in the old delightful way, and came towards me, blushing like—like a June rose! I kissed her with all my heart. Judge of my concern when her face puckered and her eyes filled with tears!

"‘What is the matter?’ I exclaimed.

"‘You are so—so unsubstantial!’ she sobbed. ‘You look just as usual, yet, when I came to kiss you, it was worse than kissing a soap-bubble. There wasn’t even the taste of soap!’

"I wanted very much to comfort Gwendollen, and the best way of doing it, it appeared to me, would have been to take her on my knee. But, under the circumstances, was that to be managed? We did at last surmount the difficulty—in a kind of way. I sat on a chair, as I sit now, and she placed herself on the same piece of furniture sidewise; but it was not half so comforting as the real thing. However, we could talk, and talk we did, without any apprehension on my part of losing the train and forfeiting my return ticket, and not having enough money to pay for a lodging, or to take me back to London next morning. The baby slept soundly all this time, and the mutual confidences of Gwendollen and myself were only disturbed by a knock at the door. Gwendollen, tearing her attention from me, instantly sprang to it and opened it a very little way. The knocker proved to be one of the female servants with a letter.

"‘For you, please, miss,’ she said, seeming quite delighted (Gwendollen is a universal favourite). ‘I do

hope it is the right one!' (I need hardly explain, my dear Pegley, that the right one would have been a letter from me.) Then she went on to say that she hoped the baby would soon go off to sleep and give Miss Williams-Johnson a chance to read it. (The good creature could hardly have been more eager over an amatory epistle from a sweetheart of her own.)

"'Why, Winny,' said Gwendollen, in surprise, 'the baby has been asleep this hour and more!'

"Winny could hardly believe it; for happening to pass the nursery door several times within the last hour, when engaged in the exercise of her household duties, she had distinctly, she averred, heard the sound of voices 'murmuring-like.' This had conveyed to her the impression that the baby was obstinately wakeful, and that his governess was endeavouring to lull him into forgetfulness by telling him a story.

"'I—I was reading aloud to myself, Winny,' Gwendollen returned, and though her back was turned to me, I could see the tips of her ears redden at the fib she was telling. Then she would have shut the door, but, before she could do so, Winny uttered an exclamation.

"'Lawk!' she said, 'how the parlour flue do leak, to be sure!' (There was no fire in the nursery grate.) 'The room is full of smoke, miss, so it is!' And before my alarmed Gwendollen could prevent her, she pushed past her and came in, walking heavily on tiptoe. She sniffed as she approached me. 'My heart! what a smell o' soot! Sure to goodness, miss, you must be smothered alive!' She walked backwards and forwards through me, without (to my intense relief) appearing to notice anything in the least out of the common. She flapped vigorously with her apron, creating a draught which nearly carried me up the chimney. "'Tis a shame!' she said, 'and the window not to be opened acause of the baby.' She shook her head, she sighed loudly and as-

tentatively. 'I've often murmured, miss,' she said, 'acause the Lord had been pleased to make me nothing better than a housemaid. But He might have done worse. . . . He might have made me a nursery governess!' She shook her head again, heaved another gusty sigh, and creaked out of the room. Gwnedollen turned to me with the letter in her hand.

"'How annoying!' she exclaimed, 'that girl should have come in like that! It seems so—so degrading, that you should have been mistaken for a smoky chimney, though you have grown so faint I can hardly believe that you are really there.'

"I was beginning to revive now that Gwendollen's undivided attention was mine again. A burning eagerness possessed me. As soon as I became developed enough to speak, I begged her to read the letter in her hand. Its contents had greatly astonished me."

"How could you know what the letter said," I asked, "when you had not opened the envelope?"

"Easily enough," returned Johnson-Williams. "Matter is no obstruction to the thought-body, and therefore to the thought-intelligence the contents of an unopened letter one has any desire to read are as plain as print. When a common earthly medium," he spoke with great scorn, "can perform the feat in question, is it likely that it would present any unsurmountable difficulties to Me—in my present etherealised condition?"

I begged his pardon quite humbly, and he went on:

"The letter contained astonishing news—glorious news, for Gwendollen and myself."

VII

"The letter contained glorious news, as I have said. The writer was head clerk in the employ of a firm of solicitors established in Llanberis, the town where

Gwendollen, until a few years previously, had resided with the elderly aunt who, in fact, reared her from infancy, though not with affection, still with a kind of sour kindness, and whose recent decease and eccentric testamentary——"

"I know," I interrupted, "few thousands in Consols—little furniture—left to an hospital. You said that before."

"I may have done so, my dear Pegley," remonstrated the Shade of Johnson-Williams, "but I wish you had let me say it again, because, in point of fact, the contents of the solicitor's letter did much to remove any imputation of injustice from the old lady's conduct. It appeared that a codicil had been discovered in a Delft teapot, bearing a later date than the Will itself, and providing humbly enough—but still providing—for Gwendollen's future wants. A hundred a year, together with a small houseful of furniture, is not a windfall to be sneezed at."

I agreed to that.

"I leave you to imagine Gwendollen's joy," went on my friend, smiling. "Her first impulse was to throw herself into my arms; in fact, she only just remembered herself in time to prevent an unpleasant contingency. But I took her round the waist, and we did do a few steps of a polka together, so inexpressible was our joy. We had a short consultation before I took my leave, and the upshot of it all was that Gwendollen should communicate her good fortune to her employers, take all necessary steps to secure her legacy, follow up with a month's warning, at the expiration of the month proceed to London (where, in the meantime, I am to engage suitable lodgings for her), marry me as cheaply, strongly and quickly as the knot can be tied, and instantly set about the installation of a calm connubial Paradise upon the fourth floor of 26, Great Joram Street."

He beamed with delightful anticipation as he uttered those concluding words. I sprang from my chair. I seized his hand and squeezed it warmly. I slapped him on the back—at least, I went through a pantomime of doing these things. He was very much gratified, and tears rose to his eyes; whether from genuine emotion or the thump I had given him I had no opportunity of ascertaining.

"You—you are most kind, my dear Pegley!" he said, winking rapidly and swallowing a lump that seemed to rise in his throat, "and embolden me to make a request in which—in which Gwendollen joins. Will you favour me, when the nuptial ceremony really comes off, by being, in fact, my Best Man?"

I said I would, with hearty pleasure.

"And if at the same time—Gwendollen and myself having so few friends—you would go through the form of giving away the—the Bride," said my friend, "we should take it very kindly of you. A quiet little breakfast afterwards at Joram Street—I see what is passing through your mind, but make yourself quite easy"—Johnson-Williams rubbed his hands delightedly and chuckled—"the Spartan regimen to which I have of late accustomed myself will from henceforth be abandoned in favour of a more generous diet. And now, as it is getting late——"

"You are going?"

"I am about to return to Great Joram Street, and resume my ordinary everyday material self," returned Johnson-Williams. "I must confess that I am curious to learn how things have gone on in my absence; for I came straight here from Wales. Somebody may be knocking at the door, or," he grew pale, "something may have caught fire! It would not be a nice thing for me to return and find my ordinary corporeal frame calcined to a cinder, particularly when I shall be wanting it in a

month's time to be married in. Even if it were possible to obtain another," ended Johnson-Williams bashfully, "I—I really think the substitution would not be agreeable to Gwendollen, for, strange as it may seem, the dear girl really loves me, Pegley."

We shook hands. He waved me farewell, and prepared to depart. "You may like to note the process," he said, a little patronisingly. "Oblige me by putting me completely out of your thoughts; it makes it easier! Now I fix my own mind firmly on Joram Street." He began to grow transparent and thin; he spoke in muffled accents. "Good-bye! we shall meet at the office to-morrow morning."

Gradually he faded from my sight. The last thing I distinguished was the pattern of his necktie. That vanished, and from Nowhere in particular a voice—a mere thread of a voice—uttered faintly:

"Old fellow, office to-morrow! Ta-ta!"

VIII

We did not meet at the office on Wednesday morning. Johnson-Williams never turned up. He was ordinarily the very soul of punctuality, and the general impression was that he must either have had a severe accident, or have been taken seriously ill, with something catching, because an ordinary ailment never kept Johnson-Williams from his big ledger. He had worked so many bilious attacks, sun-headaches, neuralgias, sore throats, rheumatisms and catarrhs into its columns since he and it first became mutually acquainted, that it had become, in my perverted imagination, a kind of Calendar of Ailments appropriate to the varying seasons of the year.

"Unless he has been left a fortune unexpectedly," said young Simpson, our Junior Partner, in his grimly humorous way, "Johnson-Williams is certainly confined to his

bed. You don't live very far from him, Mr. Pegley." (I lived at the other end of the same parish, but that was nothing to the Junior Partner.) "You might call in on him on your way home and see for yourself how the poor fellow is getting on, if we don't hear from him in the course of the day."

I made no demur. I would have gone, under any circumstances. I really felt anxious.

To Great Joram Street, therefore, I directed my steps at the conclusion of the business day. I found it, after some inquiry, to be a murky, ill-lighted thoroughfare, *in* but not of the neighbourhood of Russell Square. The houses that loomed on either side were old-fashioned, gaunt and sooty of face, and so much in need of rebuilding that every vehicle that rattled over the ill-set cobblestones set them quaking to their very foundations. Joram Street I found to be prolific in cats, vociferous with children; unmelodious by reason of many organs, and redolent of red herrings. But its respectability was evident. I walked along, looking for number twenty-six. That was the house on the other side of the street, with a little crowd assembled about the railings. Most of these were staring up at the unlighted fourth-floor windows; the rest were gazing into the area. A sweep and a baked-potato-seller were in the midst of a heated argument concerning some individual unknown. As I ascended the steps and knocked, the general attention, in an instant, became diverted to me. Excited whispers guessed at my identity. "It's the Doctor!" said one. "It's the Coroner!" growled another. A shock of alarm passed through my being at the mention of the Doctor and the Coroner. I raised my hand and plied the knocker. The door was opened. The landlady appeared against a halo of yellow gaslight, as a stout, respectable, elderly person. She blinked as she looked at me, and smoothed down the greasy crape-front of her shabby black gown.

"Did you want lodgings, sir?" she asked blandly.

"No," I returned; "I called—I am an acquaintance of Mr. Johnson-Williams—to enquire——"

I became conscious of a warm blast powerfully flavoured with onions blowing down the back of my neck. I glanced round. The crowd had surged to the level of the top door-step, and a burly butcher was drinking in, with hard-breathing, round-eyed curiosity, the words that fell from my lips. I glanced back at the landlady. Her hands were uplifted, palms outward, her face was pursed up and working in a most curious fashion. Her dress-bodice was agitated with subterranean sighs, a tear slid down from the corner of each eye in another minute, fell upon a projecting cornice of her figure, and splashed upon the oilcloth of the dingy hall.

"Oh, sir!" sobbed the landlady. "Oh, sir! oh! That ever I should 'a' seen the day!"

"For Heaven's sake let me come in!" I cried, in great agitation, "away from these people!" The butcher snorted indignantly. "And tell me, as quickly and as plainly as you can, what has happenend!"

By this time I stood on the hall-mat, and the landlady had shut the door, in spite of a vain effort on the part of the butcher to follow me inside. Her tears still trickled. She seemed too conscious of their value as testimonials to the softness of her nature, and the worth of my unhappy friend, to wipe them away.

"Speak!" I cried. "Tell me—Mr. Johnson-Williams——"

The landlady swallowed hard. She cast up her eyes and hands again, and produced from the innermost recesses of her being a sepulchral utterance:

"Gone!"

"Gone!" I repeated.

"Gone!" cried the landlady hysterically; "and him with half a peck of wholemeal in the cupboard, and three

pounds of American russets, and seven best quartern browns, slack-baked a-purpose, laid in for the week, likin' 'em better stale, and cheaper too. Cut down like the greens in the field, as are on the coster's barrer to-day and gone to-morrow. And me to find him, poor young lamb, after breaking into my own house like a burglar! and how that hussy of a girl managed to bolt both the doors after her when she took and offed it with that young man of hers, I cannot imagine!"

She stopped for breath, and I stood trying to realise the full horror of the catastrophe. My unhappy friend's last act before leaving his body had been to secure the house. In absolute loneliness the closing scenes of his life had faltered to an end. The poor girl in Wales! Who was to tell her? I shuddered at the thought of the blow that was about to fall on that young hopeful heart. I tried to speak, and failed at first. Then I pointed upwards, and managed to get out:

"Can I—see——?"

The landlady looked terribly confused. She groaned to hide the confusion, and let fall another tear or two. I repeated my question more loudly.

"Of course, of course, sir!" she said soothingly, "and none more welcome than yourself" (she did not even know my name) "as the poor dear thought a deal of. But, not to go on deceiving of you, he ain't here."

These words flashed on my mental retina the picture of a hospital ward, followed by a view of the interior of a mortuary, and I interrupted her suddenly.

"Tell me where he has been taken."

The landlady's face puckered up, but the tears did not come this time.

She formed with her lips the words "Not beknown."

IX

She groaned again, and waggled her head from side to side.

"Do you mean," I raised my voice, "that you do not even know the name of the hospital to which my poor friend has been conveyed?"

The landlady blinked at me. The landlady returned, "He was never conveyed to no horspittle as I am awcer on."

"Mortuary, then," I substituted.

"Nor no mortuary neither."

"In the name of Heaven," I burst out, "where is he?"

"If anyone knows," said the landlady, "that person is Doctor George!" She breathed hard as she made this admission. Her evasive manner, her evident confusion, filled me with suspicion and distrust.

"And who is Doctor George?" I demanded.

"A medical gentleman," returned the landlady, hesitatingly, "as passed when I was a-rattlin' at my own front door, an' obligingly offered to 'elp me get inside without callin' a policeman. Whips over the railin's, he does, an' climbs on the sill of the parlour winder an' pushes back the sash-bolt with a penknife. Then he crawls in an' comes round an' opens the door. 'You'd a'most think I was a perfesshnal burglar,' says 'e, with a pleasant smile. 'Ho! never, sir,' says I, an' my little Eliza laughs at the gentleman's funny way. 'I won't leave you yet,' says 'e, 'as somethink might 'ave 'appened wrong, the 'ouse bein' left so queerly, an' the 'all door bell stuffed up.' An' we goes downstairs, 'im 'an me an' little Eliza, an' there ain't no sign of a girl, an' we goes upstairs in the same way. 'E peeps in at the empty draw-in'-room an' then above, an' then we comes to the fourth floor. 'Locked!' sez 'e, rattlin' Mr. Johnson-Williams's door-handle. Then 'e stoops an' peeps through a crack.

'E's lyin' on the sofy in there,' sez 'e, 'an' appearances are suspishus. I'm a-goin' to break open this door!' An' 'e takes somethin' from a pocket at the back of 'is waist an' breaks it in—oh! deary dear! as if 'e was quite accustomed. But you're standin', sir." This was another device to gain a little time. "Please to walk upstairs." She began to exude tears again, like a slow still-worm, as she lighted a candle that stood in a battered tin candlestick on the crazy hall-table. She groaned again as she beckoned me to follow her, and, panting, laboured up the steep old-fashioned stairs as high as the fourth floor. "You'll find all his little things about," she said, as she enfolded the door-knob in her apron. "Dear—deary me!" She opened the door. I went in.

My poor friend's lodging was a good-sized combined bed-and-sitting-room situated at the back of the house, and commanding from its two windows an extensive prospect of chimney-pots, and an angular slice of a mews where hissing men rubbed down horses and clanked buckets at all hours of the day and night. There were his few books on a shelf; there was his old blackened pipe; there was his poor, worn overcoat hanging now behind the door; there was his umbrella standing in a corner; and there his Sunday hat in a blue band-box on the top of the chest of drawers. My chest pained me as I looked about; my eyes filled and smarted.

"Which a nicer and quieter young gentleman I never lodged," said the landlady, setting down the candle on the chest of drawers. "And when me and Doctor George busted into the room"—she pointed to the damaged door-lock—"and found him a-layin' on the sofy"—she waved her hand towards an ancient article of furniture, covered with slippery horsehair, which stood near the fireplace—"you might 'a' felled me to the floor with a feather-duster, such was the turn I experienced. And then the

doctor, a-puttin' his 'and as solemn as solemn on my shoulder and sayin'——"

"What did the doctor say?" I faltered.

The landlady responded with a Delphic utterance: "Faileroftheartaxiom."

I grasped her meaning after a few ineffectual efforts.

"Failure of the heart's action," I repeated. "And what—what induced you to let him take him—take it—away, without leaving any address, or—— Good heavens! It is monstrous, monstrous! You must have been out of your senses! What will my poor friend's family say to it!"

The landlady saw her chance and grasped it.

"Bless you, sir! many and many a time has the poor dear told me he hadn't got a living soul in the world, of his own blood! Many a——"

I spoke to the woman sternly.

"Mr. Johnson-Williams had employers. Mr. Johnson-Williams had friends. I, as one of them, shall report your disgraceful conduct to the firm he has served for so many years. They will take action in the matter." My voice rose. The woman cowered under my anger. "How do I know that my friend is dead at all?" I went on. "How do I know that he is not the victim of foul play? How do I know that——"

I stopped. The landlady had sunk upon the floor, a jellified heap of conscience-stricken misery. She rocked to and fro, and wept in real earnest.

"Oh! my dear 'eart alive! Kind gentleman, don't be hard on a widow woman as always kep' her house respectable, and sent her children neat to school. Which wrong it was to leave the 'ouse, but the worrit—and Doctor George—as I wish I'd never set eyes on—sendin' me with a shillin' to the 'Man and Magpie' in Kemmis Street close by, for a quartern of gin hot, with lemon to be drunk on the premises. 'Which your nerves, Missis Tichett,' he

say, 'ave 'ad a shock, and unless you take somethink to compose 'em, I will not answer for the consequences.' And me a-takin' it, consequently, and coming back to find 'em both gone, and little Eliza, says she, 'I fetched a cab for the doctor, mother, and he's took the poor young gentleman away.' 'Where?' I says, and nothink can that child tell me, except that I'm to hear from Doctor George in the morning. And never a line! And me that worried, with my 'ead a-spinning like little Johnny's top. And the story leaking out, and the dear child jeered at passin' the public-'ouse on 'is way to school with 'Who stole the corpse?' and 'Who cheated the Coroner?' and me obliged to keep the blinds down because of people staring in at the front windows all day, and throwin' things down the airy. Oh, deary dear! And friends and employers comin' to ask for the young gentleman, only to find him kidnapped by a body-snatcher or worse. And me a lost woman, if ever there was one."

"Go downstairs, woman," I commanded, in tones strangely stern. And Mrs. Tichett surged away.

X

I sat on the hard bed; my elbows rested on my knees, my fingers were twisted in my hair. Vainly I strove to probe the maddening mystery. Was my poor friend really dead? Supposing the landlady's tale true—and I was strongly inclined to believe it—who was the mysterious stranger who had helped Mrs. Tichett to break into her own house, discovered (perhaps with pre-knowledge) the condition of her unfortunate lodger, taken his own measure for getting rid of her, and then eloped with the body. I 'had heard dark things hinted about the Vivisectionists ere then. A man had told me, who had had it from another man, who was said to have had it whispered in his ear by a member of the Detective Force,

that in Berlin, Paris, Vienna and London, human subjects are regularly kidnapped, experimented on, and then either released under terrible oaths of non-betrayal, bribed into holding their tongues, or summarily put out of the way; that four-wheeled cabs patrol lonely streets for other purposes than those of obtaining casual fares, and that an elderly gentleman, a personal acquaintance of the original teller of the story, had, while walking up the Regent's Park Road in broad daylight, been hustled by three men into one of these vehicles, gagged and conveyed to a certain house in the neighborhood of Maida Vale, where, after being strapped down upon a table covered with sheet-lead and furnished with a sink and gutter, he had subsequently undergone the mortification of being ripped up, of having the whole of his digestive apparatus extracted "under his very eyes" (cocaine or some other pain-deadening drug having been previously administered), of having the essential organs put back again after liesurely examination, and after three weeks of well-tended imprisonment this victim found himself, after a short period of unconsciousness, lying on his back in the middle of Paddington Green, with a bank-note for a thousand pounds in his vest pocket, and no other trace of a recent operation remaining, than a neat longitudinal seam, which he carried about with him until his dying day.

My mind revolting from these horrible suspicions, I began to recall the good, simple ways of my poor vanished friend—to conjure up his image as it had appeared before me that night at Hampton Wick.

Great Heavens! was it possible? There he stood before me, neatly defined, if somewhat cloudy, in the uncertain light of the guttering, flaring candle.

I sprang to my feet with a shout of joy.

"Less emotion, I beg, my dear Pegley," said the faint, hollow voice I knew so well. "The disturbance and

agitation of your mind have prevented my getting here sooner, and delay, under the present circumstances, is an aggravation of the anxiety from which I am just now suffering."

"I cannot express what relief it is to see you," I said, "under any circumstances," grasping his filmy hand. "But if you will not think me rude, I had rather you had brought your body with you—I had indeed!"

The features of Johnson-Williams twitched. He seemed to swallow once or twice convulsively before utterance became possible. Then he said:

"That is just what I wanted to speak to you about. I—in fact, I don't know where it is."

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE IT IS."

"Be calm, my dear Pegley!" entreated Johnson-Williams. "I am perfectly earnest in saying I don't know where my—my bodily substance—is located at this moment," he gulped. "It appears to have been mislaid or—or stolen." He winked convulsively and loosened his wraith of a shirt collar. "The landlady's story I should adjudge to be true. Last night—when I came home and found myself Gone! the woman was in strong hysterics, genuinely induced by fear and alarm. This Doctor George! What motive could that person possibly have had, my dear Pegley, in taking me away? You had Vivisection in your mind just now. I hardly agree with that supposition." He took a seat on the edge of one of the rickety chairs, and crossing his phantom legs, bent on me the look he always put on when he felt he was going to get the better of me in an argument. "I was supposed to be dead, you know; and you can't possibly vivisect a dead person."

"I suppose not," I agreed thoughtfully.

"Therefore," said Johnson-Williams more cheerfully, "let us put unpleasant contingencies out of mind for the present. I have been all my life a toiling, moiling, in-

dustrious kind of body, but now that I have no body to toil and moil with, I feel myself justified in taking a short holiday. Meanwhile, my dear Pegley, if you would oblige me by keeping your eyes open and looking about a little, I make no doubt that you will obtain some clue to the whereabouts of my corporeal entity in a very short time; in fact, I feel sure it will ultimately turn up," said Johnson-Williams, quite light-heartedly. "A cautiously-worded advertisement, now, short and cheap, in the 'Wanted' column of *The Echo* might bring about a desirable result. Put it something in this way: 'Will the gentleman who accidentally'—mustn't offend him, you know—'accidentally abstracted a Body from 26, Great J. Street, on evening of Monday last, kindly communicate with owner of same? Small reward will be given'—it will have to be a small one, you know—'on return undamaged, to original address.' Perhaps you will not mind drawing the formula up, and getting it inserted. You will find six-and-sixpence inside the lining of my Sunday hat, in the blue bandbox you see upon the chest of drawers."

"Of course," I cried, starting to my feet, "anything I can do shall be done!"

"I knew I might rely on you, Pegley," said the phantom of my friend, brightening dimly, "in this perplexing dilemma—for it is a perplexing dilemma, isn't it? When I drifted in at the office ventilator this morning, and saw you all at work and my place empty, it struck me more forcibly than ever what a perplexing dilemma it was." He sighed. "But as I cannot be of much use in my present condition, I must leave the matter entirely in your hands. I have so much belief in your intelligence and energy"—this sounded a little patronizing, I thought—"that I feel almost easy in doing so." To my consternation, he began to fade away.

"Where are you going?" I demanded.

"Back to Wales," said the receding voice.

In another minute he would be out of hearing.

"Stop!" I shouted.

"Hullo!" returned Johnson-Williams, from quite a long way off.

"What am I to say to the landlady? How am I to account for your absence to Mr. Simpson?" I dragged him back with all the will-power I could compress into a single effort.

"Hah!" he said, reappearing suddenly. "That is a difficulty. I'm afraid you will have to be rather subtle my dear Pegley, to avoid telling an actual falsehood." It struck me forcibly that in shifting the burden of his responsibilities to my shoulders, he had somehow confused our relative positions. "You should begin, I think," he said, "by advising Mrs. Tichett to keep her own counsel for a day or two. And you might account to the people at the office for my non-attendance, by saying that I am not at all myself just now—which is absolutely true; and that I am lying by—I wish I knew where I was lying by—until I am recovered; and that I hope soon to be out of the doctor's hands—which I do most fervently. Good-bye, again, my dear fellow." He waved his hand, and started for Merthyr Tydvil.

XI

I am ashamed to say that the Heads of our Office were taken in by that Delphic message of Johnson-Williams. His long years of assiduous attendance to duty, his unwavering adherence to the big ledgers up to the present moment, stood him in good stead.

"How is poor old J.W. today?" the clerks would enquire sympathisingly. "Pretty bad, eh? Thought so; you look so fagged and green about the gills. No idea you were such friends."

I had no idea of it myself before that period. But I

led a life of wasting anxiety upon the account of Johnson-Williams. To begin with, the advertisement in *The Echo* had never been answered; and a carking sense of responsibility under which I laboured, robbed me of all relish of life. I continually found myself making out policies of insurance in which the A1 copper-bottomed teak-built schooner *Merthyr Tydvil*, owned by the firm of Blank and Blank, Great Joram Street Docks, under command of Doctor George, and laden with crates, chests and bales of Johnson-Williamses to the amount of so many thousands, was underwritten for so much in case of loss, under the protection of the Collision Clause.

When the working day was done I would snatch a hurried meal and start upon the track of Doctor George. I had looked him up in the Medical Directory and found two of him; one resident at Highgate and the other at Kew. Subsequent investigations proved the first to be a weak-eyed young man who lived with and under the continual supervision of a mother and aunt of undoubted respectability and severe appearance; while the second was a white-haired old gentleman who had long abandoned practice and used to be taken out in a Bath chair drawn by a rosy-cheeked gardener, for a daily airing round the Gardens. It was plainly apparent that neither of these could have kidnapped the body of my friend, and yet I felt it my duty to keep them under perpetual observation.

"Doctor George! A feigned name, of course!" I would mutter as I tossed on my sleepless bed. "Doctor George!" The name seemed written on my brain in letters of phosphorus. My flesh fell away, though barely a fortnight had passed since the abduction from Great Joram Street; my features, like my boot-heels, began to show traces of my restless existence. I unspeakably longed for an interview with the astral being of my unhappy friend, yet I forebore to summon him; such was my dread of the

ok of reproach with which he would receive the confession of my failure.

It struck me sometimes that he was near; that he wanted to see me. But, like a coward, I resolutely put him out of mind. It was upon the second Sunday following my first memorable visit to Great Joram Street (whose inhabitants had left off staring down the area of No. 26 and greeting Mrs. Tichett with opprobrious epithets), that this consciousness of proximity came upon me with irresistible force. I had intended a journey to Highgate that day—which happened to be a very wet day; and in no very happy frame of mind, I sat at breakfast dipping into the columns of *The Sunday Intelligence*, and a loud-flavoured egg, alternately.

“THE CATALEPTIC CASE IN CHELSEA

NO SIGNS OF RETURNING ANIMATION

OPINIONS OF THE MEDICAL MEN.”

I read aloud and yawned. The papers had been full of that cataleptic case for two weeks—more than two weeks past. I turned to the leader. . . .

“Cases of a similar description to that which has recently occurred in Briggs Street, Chelsea,” . . . wrote the Editor, strong in the consciousness that the *Encyclopædia*, open at the double heading (*Catalepsy*—*Catalepsy*) lay at his elbow . . .

“are far from infrequent or uncommon. Katalepsy, in the original Greek, signifies a taking possession of—a state of more or less complete insensibility, with absence of the power of voluntary motion and statue-like rigidity of the body and limbs. . . . Patients in the death-like trance inseparable from the attack may remain (as in the present case) for weeks in that

condition, with circulation and respiration little affected. Though in the instance so prominently brought before our notice, these functions are said to be entirely suspended, there is little reason to apprehend any fatal termination. A few hours—a few days or months from the date of our present issue, Professor Phineas J. Pargeter's phenomenon will awake as bright as the proverbial button, thirsting for the sustaining half-pint of British bitter and urgent for the administration of the solid and sustaining steak."

I turned to the third page in weary disgust. Catalepsy cropped out there in the form of a detailed account of a reporter's pilgrimage to Chelsea, and consequent interview with the unconscious subject, who belonged (it appeared) to the sterner sex. The reporter dished up his facts attractively, seasoning them with bits of smart detail and racy description.

"A seething crowd," he wrote, "not entirely composed of the residents of Briggs Street, surged round the door of the shabby little public-house where the Cataleptic Wonder has remained in unbroken slumber for a fortnight or more. I pushed my way through the barrier of humanity and entered the bar. It was crowded with thirsty customers—the landlord and three shirt-sleeved assistants perspired freely in their efforts to cope with the demands made on them. After having swallowed the half-pint of malt liquor which it behooved me to order, I, in the interests of *The Sunday Intelligence*, proceeded to business. Mentioning the magic name before which all doors must open, I at the courteous invitation of mine host of the 'Pink Lion,' entered the bar parlour and sat down. Professor Phineas J. Pargeter joined me in a few minutes. . . ."

I finished my coffee at a gulp, and resting my elbows

n the tablecloth, read on with a kind of dreary desperation. . . .

XII

"A tall, athletic form, clad in professional black, a handsome face, an affable expansive manner, neatly kept white hands, which gracefully threaded the masses of dark clustering locks, or waved in the air, gracefully accompanied the harmonious tones of a deep baritone voice . . . somewhat tinged with an American accent . . . all these characteristics distinguish the individuality of Professor Pargeter, late occupant of a distinguished post in one of the most famous Transatlantic Medical Colleges. After a brief yet profoundly interesting account of the peculiar features presented in the case (all of which will be found in detail in our sixth column) the Professor courteously introduced me to his charge. (I may add that pure Christian charity alone has induced Professor Pargeter to consent to superintend the slumbers of the cataleptic, and that the philanthropic idea of raising by the small charge levied per head on visitors, a sum of money to be ultimately employed for the benefit of the sleeper, emanated from his large and teeming brain.)"

"Ha-aah!" I yawned, and read on:

"I found the Cataleptic Wonder in a small room on the second floor of the 'Pink Lion.' He reclined upon a small bedstead, about six feet in length, and three and a half in width, fully dressed, with the exception of his coat and boots, which had been removed, revealing a pair of much-darned brown worsted socks. He presented, at the first glance, the appearance of a sleeping man; but a closer inspection revealed the unnatural rigidity of the limbs and the

bluish shades that veiled the mouth and closed eyelids. . . ."

I refolded the paper to get at the top of a fresh column, and, propping it against the milk-jug, read on:

"In his waking moments, the Cataleptic Man of Chelsea cannot, even by his most partial acquaintances, be considered a specimen of beauty. His developments are meagre, his skin sallow, his hair possesses the reddish hue which is unflatteringly stigmatised by many persons as 'carrotty,' and his chin is decorated with a stubby growth of corresponding colour, which has made its appearance during his protracted slumber. His linen (of course, his collar has been removed) boasts a pattern of brown horse-shoes, his cravat is a cheerful mixture of navy blue and orange, and the articles vulgarly known as 'reach-me-downs' are of loud-patterned tweed . . ."

(The day was growing foggy. I could hardly distinguish the column of type before me) . . .

"stripes and bars of greenish black and chocolate being thrown into relief against a background of mustard colour."

(How dark it was growing!)

"His black waistcoat was garnished by a nickel watch-chain . . ."

The letters faded completely out of view. I looked up. The shade of Johnson-Williams was standing between the table and the window. Had I summoned him without knowing it?—conjured up his image in my mind without an absolute effort of volition?

"If you only knew how impatiently I have waited for this moment," he began.

I looked at him narrowly. Surely—surely, he was strangely altered for the worse. His shape was no longer clearly defined, but nebulous and indistinct; his hues and

ments seemed, as it were, to have run into one another; his outlines were ragged and incomplete. He saw that I noticed this, and shook his head sorrowfully.

"Is—anything wrong?—I should say, more wrong than usual?" I faltered.

"An unforeseen contingency, my dear Pegley," returned Johnson-Williams, "threatens to render my present crucial position more desperate still. If you had brought me out a little sooner, something might have been done, but," he shook his head again, "I fear it is now too late."

"In Heaven's name, speak plainly!"

"I will endeavour to do so," said my poor friend. "The fact is, Pegley, I am beginning to Go."

"To go?"

"To wear out," explained Johnson-Williams, with readful calmness. "In point of fact, the—the friction of this mundane atmosphere is beginning to be too much for me. The airy, nebulous individuality which ambitious Fort rashly expelled from that envelope or case of flesh and blood (which, in my absence, was fraudulently purloined by the reptile whom we both abhor) is beginning to crumble away. The tender tail of a hermit-crab deprived of the protecting shell in which its owner invariably encases it, suffers injuries and abrasions, may be broken or torn off. The chrysalis, stripped of its protecting husk, shrivels and dies. My case parallels with either of these. Look!"

He held out his right hand—three of its unsubstantial fingers were missing! He pointed to the left side of his head—an ear was wanted there!

"As the process of Decay advances," he said gloomily, "and my airy particles disintegrate with greater rapidity, my dear Pegley, I shall lose not only fingers and ears, but entire limbs—whole sections of my anatomy will disappear, in fact, then . . ." His voice died away.

I glared at him. My mind seemed paralysed by this new disaster. It was piling Pel——

“—ion upon Ossa,” said Johnson-Williams, promptly filling up the gap in my memory.

“Has Miss . . . ?” I choked.

“I take you. Has the attention of Miss Williams-Johnson been drawn to the fact that I am—considered as a Specimen—incomplete!” He touched the place where his ear should have been, and glanced at the remaining digits of his right hand, sadly. “It has, more than once. But on these occasions I have diverted her from the topic with airy badinage, and upon her reverting to it later, persuaded her that she had materialised me imperfectly. If anything could add to my agony of spirit, it would be the knowledge that she is, at this moment (in complete ignorance of the dreadful Secret which you and I, my dear Pegley, enjoy the dismal privilege of sharing), employed in making her wedding-gown.”

Johnson-Williams wiped away the semblance of a tear. I had no words wherewith to comfort him.

XIII

“She suspects nothing, then?” I gasped.

“Nothing,” returned Johnson-Williams. “It puzzles the dear girl a little to find me so constantly about her; she thinks, I know, that in my joy at having attained the Pitch, I am neglecting my business duties, in running backwards and forwards between Merthyr Tydvil and London by any astral current that happens to be convenient.”

“Could you not . . . ?”

“I have not the moral courage,” my friend replied, “to administer such a terrible shock. And my cowardice, and her own desire to act for my welfare in all things, have resulted in her dealing me, unconsciously, a frightful Blow.” He winced as if he had really had it.

"A blow?" I interrogated.

"The firm of solicitors in Llanberis which you may remember was entrusted with the settlement of her aunt's affairs, and whose Senior Partner first communicated to Gwendollen the fact of a legacy having been left her"—really, Johnson-Williams was very prolix—"have got through the legal formalities inseparable from testamentary dispositions, with extraordinary celerity. Gwendollen is mistress of a little income in her own right, and a moderately-sized household of furniture. And I joyfully regret to say, my dear Pegley," said Johnson-Williams, "that she gave warning to the coal-merchant a week ago, and will arrive in London within the next forty-eight hours or so with the avowed intention of getting married directly. Meanwhile," continued the miserable fellow, "I am to look out quiet respectable lodgings for a single young lady, and give notice of our intending nuptials to the Registrar of the parish in which they happen to be situated."

He tore his shadowy hair and seemed to gnash his teeth.

"Where am I? Who has got me? Days—weeks you have been searching high and low, I know; I have been near you often when you seemed"—there was a tinge of bitterness in his tone—"to be quite unconscious of my proximity. I have accompanied you in your excursions North and West. I have seen the Doctor George who lives at Highgate and the Doctor George who resides at Kew. Neither of these is identical with the miscreant who has my property in his possession. That villain, when about to carry out his nefarious designs, began by giving the landlady a name as much unlike his own as could be invented on the spur of the moment. Therefore, by a very natural deduction, the man you should have been looking for all this time, ought to have been an individual whose name was Anything but Doctor George!"

Such was his frenzied vehemence that he quivered like a cobweb in a strong draught. I began to feel that I had not been born for a detective.

"Never say die!" It was an idiotic remark to make, but I could not think of any other.

"I should much prefer not to do so, my dear Pegley," said Johnson-Williams, with the ghost of his amenable manner. "But you must admit that I am in a horrible situation. If within the next few days my corporeal tenement cannot be recovered, I shall be forced to communicate the cruellest of shocks to a dear, beautiful girl." His shadowy features quivered, like the reflection of a face seen in water over which a breeze is passing, and he wrung his filmy hands. "And even should her true affection triumph over circumstances," he continued, "and she was to announce her willingness to marry the mere unsubstantial shadow of a husband—what ordinary Registrar would consent to perform the ceremony? Or if a Clergyman gifted with the necessary amount of imagination could be found, with what truth could I approach the hymeneal altar with the solemn declaration that there is no existing barrier to my union with Gwendollen?"

He clasped his hands under his ghostly coat-tails, and began to fluctuate—I cannot say walk—rapidly up and down the room.

"If nothing comes to light, if no trace of me is discovered before the period of my poor dear girl's arrival, perhaps you would not mind, my dear Pegley, meeting the Welsh Express at Euston Road Station, No. 3 platform, Tuesday morning, 8.30 a.m., and assisting Gwendollen to procure a comfortable, quiet apartment in some respectable lodging-house. There is a notice of Rooms To Let in one of the fanlights over the front door of this very house; I saw it in ascending from the level of the first floor to your window" (I lived on the third floor).

"The Poet has observed that when we stoop to deceive—for our own good or that of others—we weave a Tangled Web!" He shook his faint head sorrowfully. "If I should still persist, up to and after Gwendollen's arrival upon the—in short—the scene, in not turning up, I must trouble you, my dear Pegley, to add a few strands to the Fabric already elaborated. It is desirable that I should, in my present deplorable condition of mind—I cannot say body—avoid an interview with Gwendollen at present—shun her very vicinity, in the fear of being forced in a moment of weakness to reveal my pitiable condition. Pressure of business at the office would, I think, be a feasible excuse! Or a natural delicacy in obtruding my presence upon her, previously to our union—I leave it to you to decide upon the line it would be best to take. Divert her mind, my dear Pegley, as much as you can. Prevent her, if possible, from thinking about me. Keep her, if you can again, from wishing to see me—from forming that mental image of me which will infallibly result in my Development."

He had come to me without being summoned in this way.

"You must have done it unconsciously," said Johnson-Williams, answering my thought, "it could not have happened otherwise." Then the agitation returned and seized him, and shook him in a manner painful to witness. "My body, my body!" he groaned. "Who knows what treatment that—that villain may not have subjected it to? Who knows where it may be lying at this moment? A fortnight ago I rejected your theory of Vivisection as too impossible to entertain. To-day I find myself struggling against the growing conviction that I have been Dissected for medical purposes"—I felt my hair creep sympathetically and a cold chill run down my back—"and that the most important features of my organisation are at present on—on exhibit, in glass demi-

johns of proof spirit, tied over the top with oiled parchment and string, on the dusty shelf of an obscure surgery! The rest of me"—he turned a lack-lustre eye on mine—"has most probably been buried in a dust-heap! It—it's a dreadfully choky idea, isn't it? Hope I haven't spoiled your breakfast. Good morning."

XIV

The 8.30 Welsh Express came into Euston Station punctually—that is, at little more than half-past nine. In the cold white light of a damp and cheerless May morning, the tousled heads of passengers who had been travelling all night were thrust out of the windows, and shouts of "Porter!" made the glass roof echo again.

There were two Pullman cars on the train. I did not trouble about examining their inmates very minutely, but walked on towards the end of the platform, where the third-class compartments were. I had formed a picture of Miss Williams-Johnson in my mind, as a red-cheeked, healthy young woman of the nursery-governess type; and under the influence of this pre-conviction, looked into a good many faces without finding any to correspond with my ideal. Minutes passed. The carriages emptied, the platform cleared, and still I rambled vaguely up and down. Perhaps Miss Williams-Johnson had been detained—perhaps she would come by the next train. But at that moment, a porter passed me shouldering a small black trunk. The initials G. W. J. were painted on it in white. He dangled a bonnet-box and a small bag in his unoccupied hand, and was followed by a young lady.

"I don't see the gentleman, miss!"

"He is sure to be here," said the young lady; "please look about you again, and remember the description I gave you."

The porter's countenance expanded into a grin.

"There's a many gents in London as answers to that description," he said. "But I'll ask the constable at the turnstile. . . ." Box and all, he broke into a run.

The young lady put back a brown gauze veil from a charming face and looked about her a little bewilderedly with a pair of brilliant blue eyes. She had evidently been travelling all night, for she looked fatigued and slightly crumpled, but there was not a speck of dust or grime on her neat little person. Those lovely eyes lighted with hope as the returning bulk of the porter in company with a large smiling policeman bore down upon her.

The policeman was something of a joker in his way.

"Jim—this man here, miss," he said with assumed stolidity, "tells me that you were expecting a gent to meet you as 'asn't, so to speak, come up to the mark. Might I ask what kind of looking individual he might be?"

The young lady blushed a little.

"He is tall and thin," she said, "with auburn hair and no mustache to speak of, and he wears a brown bowler hat, and a suit of checked tweed—a yellow and chocolate pattern, and a blue tie with orange spots, and a black waistcoat, and a watch-chain which looks like silver, but is not," she concluded.

The policeman and the porter suppressed a mutual guffaw.

"As Jim here said just now," the policeman remarked, "we have a good many young gentlemen in London as dress like that. You're from the country, no doubt?"

"I am a native of Wales," said the young lady quietly. "And as this is the first time I ever was in London, I cannot believe that the gentleman I speak of would have been so—so forgetful, or so unkind, as to break his promise of meeting me!" Her blue eyes filled with tears.

"They're all like that, miss, bless you!" said the policeman. "He's just dropped it clean out of his mind and gone with a 'andsomer gal, as the song says. Not that I

believe she would be, neither." He turned an admiring leer upon the pretty face of Gwendollen, for, by this time, I was sure of her identity. I stepped forward and raised my hat.

"Miss Williams-Johnson, I believe?"

"Yes. You come from—from Llewellyn?" she said anxiously. I bowed assent.

"Oh! where is he? Can he be ill," she cried, "that he does not come himself? Perhaps you are the doctor?"

"I am only a fellow clerk in the same office," I replied.

"Mr. Pegley!" she cried. "Oh, he has so often talked of you! Pray tell me——"

"He is not ill."

"Thank Heaven!" Gwendollen cried.

The policeman had retired, but the porter still loomed in the neighborhood upbearing his burden of luggage. I procured a cab and put Miss Williams-Johnson into it.

"My friend is unavoidably prevented from appearing," I explained, as the porter hoisted Miss Williams-Johnson's box upon the top of the vehicle and crowded her handbox and bundle under the little front seat. "Therefore, he has deputed me to meet and accompany you to your lodgings."

I had engaged the vacant bed and sitting room immediately beneath my own, as Johnson-Williams had suggested.

"And I was to give you his love—his devoted love"—her bright eyes grew brighter—"and to beg you not to be anxious or worried on his account, until he is able to appear in person and set all your doubts at rest. Meanwhile"—I spoke with meaning—"he hopes that nothing will happen to divert him from his employment, which is of a most important nature. He has neglected his business sadly of late, owing to other preoccupations, the nature of which, he said, you would be able to guess." She nodded. "So," I went on, "if you would think of him

as little as you conveniently can during the interval he would be deeply indebted to you."

"It will be difficult to help thinking about him!" she said tenderly, "but I will try. Perhaps you could tell me something of the nature of the business he is engaged in?"

"It involves a great deal of research," I said truthfully; "and his whole future depends upon its successful carrying out. If I were you, I would not even write until you receive a letter from my friend."

"Is that part of the message?" asked Gwendollen quickly, and I answered:

"That is part of the message."

xv

Then as the cab wobbled along, I began to point out to her the different objects of interest to be seen in the streets of the Metropolis. It was necessary she should not be allowed to brood on Johnson-Williams too much. Her artless enthusiasm was delicious; her wonder and delight at the gaudy omnibuses, the smart carriages, the bright shops and staring advertisements, lent these things a charm they had never held before in my eyes.

My landlady received her with *empressement*. I saw the dingy door of my lodgings close upon that charming vision of youth and beauty with a sigh. She had thanked me warmly at parting. I paid and dismissed the four-wheeler and walked to the City, revolving in my mind plans for the sparkling creature's entertainment and amusement. Her thoughts must be diverted from her absent lover; she must not be allowed to brood in loneliness. . . . Ah, I had got it! I would write to a theatrical friend—obtain through his mediation three upper circle tickets for the Adelphi. . . . Three, because my landlady must accompany us as chaperon. That our party would include an invisible fourth member in the spirit of Johnson-Williams I suspected. But yet . . . \

The tickets arrived next morning.

"Never been to a theayter in all her sweet young life," said my landlady, "and jumped for joy at the bare thought of it. 'Will it be quite proper, though, Mrs. Toms?' she says, 'to go with a gentleman—and one I know so little of?' the artful dear!" Mrs. Toms evidently thought—but what did it matter what Mrs. Toms thought? She went on: "'Which a more delicate-minded gentleman than Mr. Pegley never yet breathed,' I says to 'er; and the presence of a respectable married person as has seen better days in a black silk gownd as turned like new,' I says, 'puts questions of proper or not proper entirely by!' And she jumped and clapped her hands like the bright bird she is, with 'Oh! Mrs. Toms, how delightful!' 'Which others think so, too, my lamb,' I says, and she blushed like a damson rose."

"You are not to think, Mrs. Toms——" I began.

"Bless your dear heart, I never thinks!" said Mrs. Toms, with dreadful slyness. "If," she went on, "a bit of supper arter the play would be agreeable, I'm sure my parlour is at your service. With a quart of stout and bitter, and a half-crown lobster, and a dish of salad, and a shape of jelly, and me being present, the tongue of scandal has no handle, as the saying is."

The evening that ensued was a delightful one. I look back to it now as an oasis in the desert of my commonplace life. The play we witnessed, was a celebrated melodrama with comic situations, and I am not clear to this day what it was all about. But the tragic bits (where the villain and the heroine are locked into a lonely wind-mill together, and the bold girl, preferring death to his loathsome declarations of love, hurls herself upon the sails and is carried, amidst deafening applause, slowly to the ground) made Gwendollen tremble and clutch me, unconsciously, with one little white hand—such a dainty little hand that I longed to comfort it by holding it in my

own!—and the funny scenes (where the sailor having primed himself with Jamaica rum to the pitch of making a proposal of marriage, is confounded by seeing two sweethearts in the place of one, for instance) made her laugh heartily, and in laughing, appeal to me with such brimming bright eyes and such pearly little teeth, to know whether she was right in doing so, that I spent the evening in a foolish condition of ecstasy. Mrs. Toms was very sympathetic and cried at all the love-making bits, finding out resemblances in the hero and heroine to Gwendollen (I kept calling her Gwendollen in my heart) and myself that were agreeably confusing. The lobster supper went off splendidly, and when I mixed a glass of gin and water for Mrs. Toms after a prescription compiled for her in those better days by a doctor who kept his carriage, and she slumbered after its absorption, stertorously in her chair, we conversed for quite half an hour, in whispers, about nothing in particular. And when I gave her her bedroom candle she frankly gave me that dear little hand I had been yearning to touch all the evening, and the tattoo my heart beat against my shirt-front was so loud that I fled for fear she should hear it!

"I have done as he asked me," I said, defiantly addressing my bedroom candle, as I set it down upon my chest of drawers. "I have succeeded in diverting her mind."

I took off my boots tenderly—*she* slept in the room underneath—and went to bed. I dropped into slumber almost instantly, and not having thought about Johnson-Williams much during the day, naturally dreamed of him. Dreamed of him vividly, and awoke to find his lambent astra hovering by my bedside. He looked terribly ragged, and his outlines were more indistinct than ever.

"I say, how long is this going to go on?" he said, the moment our eyes met. "Two days of the time gone and no news of my whereabouts. It is perfectly sickening!"

"If you are dissatisfied with my efforts," I said, sitting up, "why not enlist those of somebody else? I have acted as your unpaid detective for weeks past; I have laboured in your interests like a galley-slave"—I felt my voice tremble—"and you knock me up—in the middle of the night—to find fault."

"You dreamed of me, my dear Pegley," said Johnson-Williams pleadingly.

"If I did I didn't mean to," I said brusquely.

"My good friend—my only adviser," said the poor fellow, "I am afraid you will find me trying to your patience. But consider my cruel situation."

"You call me your adviser," I said. "I am afraid I am but a poor one. Is there nobody in your own sphere—nobody of your own consistency—whom you might consult?"

"Not a body—I should say, not a single soul. You don't know how stiff and standoffish they are—I mean the people whom I come across from time to time. The Fifth Rounders won't speak to the Third Rounders and the Third Rounders think it beneath them to respond to any advances from a mere beginner." He sighed. "No; I haven't a ghost of a chance of getting any help that way, my dear Pegley."

"No chance whatever!" I echoed brutally.

"They are dreadfully classy—you can have no idea how classy they are," rejoined my poor friend despondently. "The brokers at Lloyd's are contemptuous and overbearing in their way of treating underwriter's clerks and agents' assistants. But the Mahatmas and Adepts and so forth whom I occasionally encounter are worse—far worse! They consider me an interloper. If ever I get back into myself again, Pegley, nothing shall induce me to venture out of me, even for a short excursion. I am going now! Pray, pray don't relax your efforts in my behalf! Keep Gwendollen's mind occupied—be on

the lookout for any clue that may be picked up, and . . .” He was nearly gone, but came back to say, “You know—I have explained to you that I have not dared to venture into Gwendollen’s vicinity since her arrival for fear, in a weak moment, of betraying myself and shocking her. How—how does she look?”

“Very beautiful!” I answered shortly.

“How kind of you, my dear Pegley, to speak so appreciatively,” said Johnson-Williams, offering me a phantom hand, which I shook without heartiness. “It does me good to hear it—it does indeed. I had had my doubts whether she might be fretting—just a little—on account of my absence.”

“Not a bit,” I said heartlessly. “At least, if she does fret she hides it very well. You ought to have heard her laugh to-night. It sounded like a mountain rivulet, a Welsh mountain rivulet, gurgling over pebbles.”

“You have such a happy knack of simile and allusion, my dear fellow! Like a Welsh mountain rivulet!” commented the shade of Johnson-Williams. “I have often wondered what it was Gwendollen’s laugh reminded me of, and now I know, ‘a Welsh mountain——’” He broke off apologetically. “I beg your pardon, I’m afraid you are sleepy. But indeed, indeed, you have done me good. ‘A Welsh . . .’ so very appropriate! My dear old Pegley, good-night.”

He was gone.

XVI

“Which to the theayter I should have pinned my faith as full of opportunities for a young gentleman to refer to the condition of his feelinks between the ax,” said Mrs. Toms, “to say nothing of being let ’old her ’and when guns are going off and a dark drive ’ome in a four-wheel cab, behind a nuffy ’orse, if ever I see one. And yet if

you was to ast me on my oath, 'Do you see signs of anything like comin' to the p'int?'—if my lips were to breathe their last this minute! 'Yes' I could not bring myself to say. We have been to the Harcade in Covent Garden, and likewise the Tower, which with them narrow twisty stone stairs full of corners, and the thumb-blocks and screw-jaxes, and iron gentlemen grinnin' 'orrid at you with 'alberds in their 'ands, fairly swarms with opportunities, if you'll excuse me, sir, for saying so. 'Also we have been to the British Museum, where many a young couple with mutual hobelisk"—I believe Mrs. Toms meant "object," but became confused by associations—"in view, has come to an understandin'. An' to the New Law Courts an' Westminster Abbey, to say nothing of the Zoologicum Gardens—an' both of you like pictur's ridin' on a nelefunk as kep' twistin' 'is little tail round like a negg-whisk, as the keeper said were not temper, but pleasure in the exercise alone. Moreover, we have been to the 'Ippodrom," said Mrs. Toms, who was beginning to get her second wind by this time; "to say nothing of Venison Revived at Hearl's Court, when in a small boat shootin' under one of them dark archways, you might 'a' popped the question in her year, when duck year heads you must, or 'ave your brains dashed out before your own eyes. But never once," concluded Mrs. Toms pathetically, "have you snatched the lucky moment an' made mention of the condition of your 'eart. It isn't nat'ral, Mr. Pegley, and what's more, she feels it, poor dear! Else why was she crying this morning!"

"Crying?"

"Dropping tears like a cut cowcumber," said Mrs. Toms emphatically, "and therefore, my advice is, without delay, up and speak to her, Mr. Pegley, like a man. You're a retiring gentleman, Mr. Pegley, you don't know your own wally, sir. If you knowed as much as I know,

and had heered as much as I have heerd," said Mrs. Toms with something very nearly approaching a wink, "you'd be bolder, you would indeed. Take and ask 'er this afternoon—take and marry her as quick as can be—turn the two combination bed an' sittin' rooms into one sweet—you shall have 'em at thirty shillin's weekly—an' be 'appy," ended Mrs. Toms, adding the finishing touch to the alluring picture with one masterly sentence. Then, with a great assumption of delicacy, she retired down the wooden hatchway that led to the kitchen, as Gwendollen came downstairs. She was so simply and prettily dressed, looking such a very incarnation of early Summer on that beamy day, that my treacherous heart jumped madly, and I turned quite giddy at the first glance.

She had a little navy serge gown on, from the collar of which her white throat rose like a flower, and under a little black straw hat with a bunch of coquettish pink moss-rosebuds in it, her blue eyes looked out, all the brighter perhaps for the tears she had been shedding, and her golden brown locks wooed the sunshine to tangle in their meshes.

Tip-tap, came the little patent-leather shoes downstairs. Gwendollen had certainly spent several sovereigns of her aunt's legacy on prettiments of various kinds, since she had come to London. She smiled and gave me her delicious hand. But she looked thoughtful. As we descended the hall doorsteps and turned into the street, the area gate clashed, and a worn-out list slipper of heroic dimensions whizzed past my ear, and fell with a dull splash into a mud-cart which happened to be lumbering by.

XVII

"Why does Mrs. Toms throw her old shoe after us?" enquired Gwendollen innocently.

"It—it's a London custom," I replied mendaciously.

"Oh," commented Gwendollen. Then we walked on together in silence. If there can be a state of mind which is at once a state of misery and a state of rapture, my mental condition may be said to have balanced equally between those extremes that afternoon. My heart was heavy, and yet my spirits were elated; I hardly felt the pavement underneath my boots. My companion, too was fitfully talkative and monosyllabic by turns as we walked down Southampton Row, turned into Holborn, and keeping our faces Westwards soon arrived at that ganglion of thoroughfares, from which springs one of the leading business arteries of London—the Tottenham Court Road. Here Gwendollen paused, and looked up at me with enquiring eyes. She wanted to know where we were going. The conviction that I had exhausted the resources of most of the inexpensive daylight sights of the Metropolis, in the effort to keep the mind of my companion from dwelling on her absent lover, came upon me in a cold dash of realism. Only the Botanical Gardens, the Chelsea Hospital, and South Kensington Museum remained. What should I do, I wondered, when no single spot of any celebrity remained untrodden? But I ran over the list of places to my companion, and begged her to decide upon our destination. It was all the same to me where I went, I asseverated, and I spoke the truth. Whitechapel itself would have seemed as another Arcadia, had I been privileged to wander through its unsavoury labyrinths with Miss Williams-Johnson by my side. From which it will plainly be inferred that I was very far gone indeed.

"I should like to go," answered Gwendollen, a little wistfully, with an involuntary shrinking from the coarse noise and bustle of the Tottenham Court Road—"I should like to go somewhere where there is plenty of space, and a little grass, and something to sit down upon;

and nothing in particular," she went on, "that one is obliged to look at—because I have seen so many things since I came to London, that I feel quite giddy; and because"—she hesitated—"I have something important to say to you."

Something to say to me! What could it be? And where—how to pitch upon a spot presenting all the distinctive or indistinctive peculiarities preferred by my companion! Kensington Gardens was disqualified by the existence of the Albert Memorial. Regent's Park would be, I knew, at this time of year, suffering from a vivid eruption of potted-out plants. Primrose Hill—the name came to me like a revelation. I hailed the Camden Town 'bus as it lumbered past—I assisted Gwendollen to the top and reverently took my place on the garden seat beside her. It was a delightful, agonising, torturing, intoxicating experience. . . . And then we got down and walked, and I was more miserably blissful than ever. And when we passed in at the turnstile in the palings, and felt the soft turf under our feet, and began climbing the artistically oramented walks paved by an enlightened County Council, with broken cockleshells and cinders—together—smiling, talking, and panting—up the grassy ascent, my sensations became altogether indescribable. If I could have seen a white stone anywhere, I would have picked it up and made a mark on the day.

The summit of Primrose Hill—a circular space of grass—is a little dented, like the top of a boiled apple-pudding; a homely comestible which the Hill itself resembles in no slight degree. Not a living creature occupied the seats which have been placed there for the convenience of Cockney mountaineers. We were alone—quite alone. Eastwards, the dome of St. Paul's reared against a soft purplish-dun background of smoke, beyond which the

glittering towers of the Crystal Palace lifted themselves out of the green foliage of the Sydenham trees.

Highgate towered to the north, and the Hampstead Heights lifted themselves into a purer atmosphere. A lion's roar boomed out from the Zoological Gardens. If the beast had been free, and had sprung upon Gwendollen at that moment, I should have engaged him single-handed with my umbrella, and performed prodigies of valour before he ate me up.

"Will this do?" I asked, as we sat down upon the central bench, and looked about us—at least, Gwendollen looked about her—I looked at Gwendollen.

Gwendollen's answer was irrelevant. "It does seem strange," she said slowly, drawing patterns on the soft ground with the ferrule of her sunshade, as she spoke, "Llewellyn's never having come near me all this while, I should have thought . . .!"

"Remember," I said, infusing a certain degree of gentle remonstrance into my tone, "that you promised not to think at all."

"I know, and I have tried to keep my promise. It has been very hard to do so—you can hardly realise how hard." She breathed quickly and drew more patterns. "You meet him every day at the office. You enjoy the pleasure of his society and conversation each day—at the office." Her tone sounded a little hard and strange to me. "Of course," she continued, "I have heard from you regularly" (Heaven forgive me, she had!) "just how he seemed, and what he said. This morning, for instance, you told me that he looked——"

"Not quite as complete as—as I could have wished," I stammered. "He is grinding away gradually at those researches I told you of, and has lost some of his substantiality, it is true, but he seems to grow more light-hearted"—I might have said light-bodied—"every day."

She turned and looked me straight in the face. My

mendacious tongue clave to the roof of my mouth, the blood rushed into my very eyeballs, and my heart dropped into my boots, as she said slowly:

"I wonder you can dare to look me in the face and tell me such a wicked story!"

"Story!" I stuttered guiltily.

"Story!" cried Gwendollen, flushing royal red and starting to her feet, "when you know he has not been to the office *for weeks!*—that he has even left his lodgings, secretly, and his landlady does not even know where he has gone! I do not blame you"—her tone softened as she contemplated the scarlet misery of my countenance, and the crushed humiliation of my attitude—"I do not blame you. You have some kindly motive in screening Llewellyn—you have deceived me, out of sheer pity—wasted your time in endeavoring to stave off the discovery which you knew to be inevitable. Dear Mr. Pegley, kind Mr. Pegley, pray do not look so wretched, pray do not glare at me in such a dreadful manner! If Llewellyn," her voice faltered, "does not love me any more, it is not your fault, it is"—she broke down and began to cry—"it is Fate. He—though you may not know it," she sobbed hysterically, "has great gifts—capacities of a wonderful and extraordinary kind. By dint of study and research he has gone beyond himself"—it was easy to see that her mind was reverting to his performances upon the astral plane—"and beyond me. I have always known I was not worthy of him, but I never dreamed that he would prove unworthy of himself!"

XVIII

Her eyes flashed through the tears that hung on her dark curling lashes. She had never looked prettier.

"For days—weeks—I tried, as he desired, to dismiss

him from my mind. I scrupulously kept from forming even the wish to see him lest——” She stopped, but I, with my unguessed knowledge, filled in the blank. “Only as he had not exacted any promise from me that I would not attempt, indirectly, to gain any news of him”—(fool! fool! I had never thought of blocking up that avenue of discovery)—“other than the intelligence I received from you”—her lip curled—“I employed Mrs. Toms” (Oh, Toms! Toms!) “to make, very quietly and carefully, enquiries at his lodgings and at the office, with the result that I discovered the trick that had been played me—the cruel trick—three days ago!” She stamped her little foot upon the ground, and went on: “Where he is—what he is doing—I cannot tell. You, who are in his confidence” (she drew herself up proudly), “know, of course, and I do not ask you to betray him. I only command you—rely on you, to give him a message from me. Find him out—tell him that this miserable state of things must end—that my love for him, deeply wounded by deception and coldness, is fast bleeding to death. Say that I have decided to put *his* love for *me* to a final test—that I have taken the one irrevocable step, which can never be retraced—AND BOUGHT THE LICENCE!”

“Bought the license?” I echoed blankly.

“I see by your face,” cried Gwendollen, “that you think I have been a rash, rash girl” (why rash? I wondered); “but the torturing suspense—the doubts—were too much to bear, and I resolved to stake all—all upon one cast!”

She was quite pale, and looked even wild. I could not see for the life of me why the mere purchase of the licence should be regarded by her from such an inveterately tragic point of view. But I tried to look as if I understood everything, and partially succeeded. She continued:

“You remember, a few days ago, that I sent you to

borrow a book—something suitable for Sunday reading. You sent me——”

“*Pittaker’s Almanac*. I know.”

“It was not quite the kind of thing I expected,” went on Gwendollen, “but I looked in the index, to see if there was anything interesting, and under the letter ‘M’ I found——”

“Marriage,” I put in gloomily.

“Marriage,” repeated Gwendollen, suppressing her tendency to cry, as laboriously as I was suppressing the almost irresistible inclination to take her in my arms and kiss the tears away—“and all the different ways of getting married are set down so clearly that the most ignorant person could hardly fail to understand.” She dried her brimming eyes with three inches of pocket-handkerchief and went on, with the calmness of despair: “So I found out that the easiest and quickest way of doing it was to buy a license, and that to be qualified to get one from Doctor’s Commons you had only to have lived in a parish for fifteen days—and my fifteen days were up on Monday . . . and I made up my mind.”

“Did you take Mrs. Toms with you?”

“Yes,” said Gwendollen, “but I left her in a cab outside while I went in to—to buy it. There were some young clerks and two nice old gentlemen with gray heads—and I told them about Llewellyn being unable to come himself, and I paid thirty shillings, besides thirteen and sixpence for the stamp. Doesn’t it seem a dreadful lot of money? And I went into several little dark offices one after another and swore all sorts of things that they told me I had got to swear; and kissed a Testament—such a dusty one—and never knew what an awful, awful thing I was doing, till——” She broke down.

“Till? Pray go on!” I begged. No baleful light had as yet dissipated the mental darkness in which I wandered.

"Till just as I was coming away!" almost shrieked Gwendollen.

"I met the fattest and most fatherly of the two old gentlemen. . . . Of course I shook hands with him, in saying good-bye, and he kept my hand in his and patted it as if he was sorry for me, and said: 'I hope you may never, never regret the step, young lady, that you have taken to-day.' I said, 'Oh, why?' And he said. . . ."

She stopped to have her sob out, and a great coil of her chestnut hair freed itself from the mass crowned by her little hat, and fell in silken heaviness upon her slight heaving shoulders.

"He said he hoped I realised the gravity of my position. Of course I knew that if the young gentleman to whose willingness to marry me I had just solemnly testified did not 'come up to time' (those were the very words) within twenty-one days from date, I should be obliged, under penalty of fine and imprisonment, to marry Somebody Else. Her Majesty the Queen and the Archbishop of Canterbury did not c-care who it was, but it must be Somebody; they were not going to give their permission for nothing—nothing! When I had paid t-two pounds three and s-six! . . . I don't know how I got away, I was frightened and dazed—it was only when I reached home that the full meaning of what I had done came upon me like a thunderbolt. It has been growing clearer and more plain every hour. . . . See! there is the awful, awful thing!" She pulled the stamped and folded official paper out of her little pocket and threw it on the ground. "I cannot bear to look at it; it reminds me of the dreadful risk I run. The risk of being married to some strange, dreadful Somebody, if Llewellyn—after all the years we have been engaged—doesn't love me w-well enough to come and do it himself!"

She buried her face in her hands. I rose and picked up the marriage licence, and stood looking down at her and

thinking. There are people who consider me an honest, kindly sort of fellow, to-day. These laugh if I tell them that I once came very near being a villain and a scoundrel. Yet it is true. I felt not a spark of pity as I watched the girlish creature sorrowing there. I triumphed in my friend's misfortune—the misfortune which was now my opportunity. Love comes upon us all in different guises; sometimes as a jester, sometimes as a beggar, sometimes as an angel of light, sometimes as a Devil. Love had come to me with the crape and jemmy of a burglar—had cracked the crib of my integrity and stolen away the jewels of honesty, true faith and friendship. Because, adoring Gwendollen as I did, it had occurred to me that the harmless little joke of the lively old gentleman at Doctors' Commons, which the innocent girl had taken seriously—might be turned to account—to my account! We don't generally believe stories about Possession. . . . But upon my honor, so nearly forfeited!—upon my soul, so nearly stained with a wicked deed!—some strange Power forced me to act, to speak, to look, as I would not of my own conscious volition have acted or spoken or looked. I touched Gwendollen on the shoulder, and she lifted her head—that dear head! I met her eyes with mine, and a feeling I had never before experienced awoke in me as I plunged my glance into those clear blue depths.

"You will take him my message?" Gwendollen begged. "You will tell him that if I acted foolishly it was out of my—my love for him. And that he must—but he will, he will!—come and save me!"

"I will tell him!" That cold metallic voice! How unlike mine!

"Thank you!—oh, thank you! And he will come. You believe so?"

"I do not believe it, Miss Williams-Johnson!"

XIX

She gasped and swayed backwards. She was not going to faint, she said, as I threw my arm about her in support. What treacherous joy it gave me! Only rich girls in novels fainted, and she was not one of them. But she was quite well now, and I must explain to her candidly and plainly the meaning of my cruel words.

The exigencies of the past ten weeks had developed in me a talent for fiction which, until recently, had lain dormant in my system. The consciousness of untruth no longer was painful to me: I had begun almost to take a pride in lying, and lying well. But my newly-gained experience did not account for the fiendish facility with which I unrolled my web of falsehood under the eyes of the poor girl—turned it this way and that like a skilled shopman, and persuaded her, with glib readiness, that the article was genuine. No! my theory, that I was temporarily possessed then and afterwards has never been shaken—never will be, while life remains!

"You ask for an explanation," said the voice which was, and which was not mine. "You wish for candour. Let the candour be on both sides. You spoke just now of Llewellyn's peculiar pursuits—of a wonderful and extraordinary faculty which, by laborious efforts, he has attained. What those pursuits are, the nature of that faculty, are known to me as well as to yourself. On the same evening on which he visited you at Merthyr Tydvil, to report his wonderful discovery" (she started) "he paid me a visit—literally a flying visit—on the way home. That I have been in his confidence to a certain extent during these past weeks, you are aware. You know now how entirely he has placed his trust in me. I could wish," I faltered dramatically, "that he had not made me the recipient of his secrets. Now——"

"Go on!" said Gwendollen breathlessly.

And I, or rather It, went on:

"It is true that my friend has not been near the office for a considerable time. It is true that he has secretly abandoned his lodgings. I will tell you why when you have answered me a question or two. To begin with, when did your last interview take place—at Merthyr Tydvil?"

Gwendollen considered a moment. "Some twenty-four hours before I left. I had been seeing a great deal of him up till then—so much that I feared, in his enjoyment of the exercise of his new power of conveying himself wherever he liked, he was neglecting his work at the office."

"Did you," I continued gravely, "make any announcement to him of any decision you had formed—any step you were determined to take—at that last interview?"

"I told him about my having quite made up my mind to come to London" (she blushed) "and get married immediately."

"Did he—forgive me!—did he seem delighted or disturbed by the news? Did he endeavor to persuade you to remain in Wales, for instance, and hint that the wedding might be put off a little longer?"

"He certainly did! Oh, Mr. Pegley!"

"Keep calm, I beg you. Another question. Did anything strike you as strange in his appearance?"

"Yes; he seemed—I cannot explain!" She shook her head and knitted her lovely brows. "He seemed—not altogether there; for instance, I questioned him about—about the strangeness, but he explained everything quite easily." She started to her feet. "Was he deceiving me?" she cried. "Was he——"

"Sit down again." I fixed my eyes on hers, and she obeyed. "He was deceiving you—in a measure."

"Yes; and where—where is he now? After all this deception, all this falsity, tell me plainly, Mr. Pegley!"

"He is in India." (What was I going to say next!)

"IN INDIA!"

"I should have said Thibet." What in the name of all that is diabolical put Thibet into my mouth?

"Thibet!"

"That is his spiritual body. His earthly body is at present traversing the Suez Canal in the hold of a Calcutta-bound merchant-steamer."

The unhappy girl stared at me blankly. But I, or It, was not in the least abashed. I could have gone on slowly, clearly, smoothly, distilling mendacity after mendacity, without the slightest sense of fatigue for hours and hours.

"But how? I do not understand. He could not possibly afford to pay the passage, even if——"

I smiled coldly.

"He has no passage to pay. He has projected his animating essence on before, by means of his geographical knowledge—which, as you know, is very considerable. From England to Calcutta, from Calcutta to Benares, from Benares to the Sikkim Himalaya" (what had I ever heard about the Sikkim Himalaya?), "from thence to Central Thibet. While his inferior earthly envelope" (I was quoting his own words) "travels, packed in a crate or box (I believe a box), simply and cheaply, as cargo." I anticipated a question here, so went on to explain, with a glib smoothness that astonished me. "You know he has been connected with a firm of underwriters for years; you are aware that he must have acquaintances in the shipping line; that one of these, in return for some slight service, could have obliged him by forwarding, free of expense, a crate or packing-case—containing supposedly, gardening tools and flower bulbs (at once accounting for the length of it, and the inscription 'With Care. Perishable!' nailed on the lid)—to a firm of luggage agents in

Calcutta—to be left till called for—is hardly inconceivable.”

It was inconceivable, but did she not guess that. My astonishing fecundity of invention, my cool self-possession were irresistible. I had the marriage licence in one hand, having enforced points in my explanation, by tapping it on the palm of the other. She put out her poor little trembling fingers, and drew it from mine as she said, with forced calmness:

“And when Llewellyn arrives at the Calcutta agents’, how is he going to claim himself?”

I lied again, before I could stop myself. I made a new link in the chain of forged evidence which I was winding round my victim at a blow.

“She will arrange all that!”

“SHE! Ah!” cried Gwendollen, springing to her feet with blazing cheeks, and eyes that darted blue lightning. “At last I begin to understand!”

That was a good thing, because I did not! I was a passive instrument in the hands of the cunning inventive demon that had got hold of me.

“Who is she?” She stamped her pretty little foot upon the ground.

“She is the daughter of a Rajah—a Thibetan Rajah. A Buddhist priestess, if I understood my friend aright.”

“And how—where did they meet? You *shall* tell me!” Miss Williams-Johnson commanded imperiously.

“You see,” I said, “it has always been the dream of Llewellyn’s life to travel. In the first blush of his great discovery—when he found that he had really attained the Pitch—he spent all the time that he did not devote to you in visiting foreign countries.”

“He never told me so!”

“He would not. He might have feared your being jealous.”

“Jealous!”

XX

"Jealous!" Gwendollen repeated scornfully.

"Or over-anxious for his safety. Well, of all the countries he visited, Thibet, as the home of Theosophic Buddhism, attracted him the most. Then, as he became drawn into the vortex of attraction created by Sankaracharita—Princess Sankaracharita is her name——"

"How hideous!"

"I fear his fidelity to you wavered, if it did not altogether go by the board. Even when impelled by self-reproach, remorseful regard, he sought your society, you must remember that you could never develop him completely."

"It is true."

"Because his spirit—a good deal of it at least—still remained with Sankaracharita. They are in absolute sympathy, I believe, and she is an extremely gifted woman though she has only been a votary of Buddha for two hundred years. During a hundred and fifty of them, he tells me, she has sat upon a palm-leaf mat, revolving her thumbs slowly one over the other, and reflecting on the Imponderability of Negative Reality."

"*He has fallen in love?*" Gwendollen uttered slowly, "Llewellyn has fallen in love with a woman who has lived for two hundred years! Why, she must be a *mummy!*"

"Buddhists lead a very calm existence," I responded, "and consequently live to incredible ages. When you have sat upon a palm-leaf mat for ninety years, you may just as well go on doing it for two hundred. And it is not the beauty of her body, but of her soul, her fifth principle, which fascinates Llewellyn. He tells me that she possesses a finer fifth principle than any woman he has ever met."

"He has not met very many," said Gwendollen, with

bitter contempt. "Let him stop with Sankaracharita if he chooses—let him sit on a palm-leaf mat and turn into a mummy, too, if he likes—I shall not trouble my head, or my heart, about him any more! I will never think of him or wish to see him any more! I will forget him as completely as he has asked me to forget him! I know why he did that now! It was to prevent himself from being drawn out of the 'vortex' of Princess Whatever-you-may-like-to-call-her's attractions—ha, ha, ha!" She laughed hysterically. "When I go home, Mr. Pegley, I will burn all his letters, every one, with all the presents I ever received from him." (I guessed that there were not many, as the poor fellow whom I had so cruelly misrepresented had never had any money to spend.) "And as for this——"

I snatched the marriage licence from the hands that were about to rend it into fragments.

"Stop!" I said sepulchrally. "Recall yourself! Remember the danger to which you are exposed—remember the warning given you by the old gentleman at Doctors' Commons! Do you wish to be fined?—imprisoned for life in Holloway Gaol? I wish to be a friend to you, Miss Williams-Johnson—again I threw a hypocritical quiver of emotion into my accents—"and a friend must speak plainly If I had done so before—consented to betray the confidence of the unhappy man who once"—I drove in the nail with a repetition—"once loved you, I might have saved you from what is now inevitable. You have bought a marriage licence, and you *must* marry—marry within twenty-one—no nineteen days, for three are gone, never to return. The question is, WHO?"

She regarded me with eyes full of inexpressible dread. Her pale lips moved, repeating:

"Who?"

I, or the diabolical creature that had got hold of me, pretended to consider.

"Who! Is there any person in Wales who has at any time professed regard—more than regard—you understand?"

She shook her head.

"Nobody whom I could think of for a moment. Not one" (there had been more than one, then) "whom I could ever look upon as—as a husband!"

"Unfortunately," I sighed, "you cannot, in your present position, afford to pick and choose. There is so little time" (she shuddered), "that the most indispensable qualification, in the person you ultimately decide upon, is that he should be a bachelor. Are they all bachelors?"

"All except one," replied Gwendollen unwillingly, "an elderly widower, with a family. He is an oil-merchant in a very extensive way of business."

"An oil-merchant!" I shook my head. "It is an inflammable calling. I have known a good many oil-merchants who systematically ill-treated their wives. As to the others?"

"There are only two others," answered Gwendollen. "One of them is the chief engineer of a Mining Company. He is paid quite a large salary, and is a very clever young man, having invented a pneumatic shaft-borer out of his own head, but——"

"Oh, come!" I said, in a tone of fastidious disgust, "it will never do for you to throw yourself away on a Borer."

"I felt that myself," replied Miss Williams-Johnson modestly. "The last——"

"Number Three?"

"Number Three is a young Dissenting minister; a Baptist—I believe he is very eloquent as a preacher, and very good; but, oh!" she winced, "he has such damp, red hands, and he combs his hair into his neck, and uses a great deal of pomatum or something to make it shiny."

"And were you to marry him, he would probably dip you into his chapel-tank!" I suggested.

"I would never submit to that," cried Gwendollen emphatically. Then her tone changed: "Dear Mr. Pegley," she said sadly, "why do you take so much trouble about a poor deserted girl? Let the Archbishop of Canterbury take away all my money—let him shut me up in the Tower of London, if he likes, for all the remaining years I have got to live—what does it matter after all?"

I moved closer to her. She did not draw away—she was too near the end of the seat for that; I took her hand gently; she let the pretty little fingers remain in mine.

"It matters a great deal to me," I said, and here I spoke nothing but the truth. "Dear Miss Williams-Johnson—dearest Gwendollen, if you would give me the precious right to protect and care for you always—if you would bestow on me the invaluable treasure of your love, priceless boons both, which Another has rejected, you would make me the happiest man in London—in the whole world!"

She turned red and pale, and at last, softly drew away her dear hand and raised her candid eyes to mine.

"You are very noble, very generous," she said, and I winced, knowing what a mean young hound I was; even as I wince to-day, after the lapse of more than twenty years: "Dear, kind Mr. Pegley, I trust you with all my heart; I believe you to be a sincere, disinterested, honourable man." (Stab after stab, making the moribund carcass of my conscience quiver!) "And so it is my duty to be perfectly sincere, perfectly candid with you. I have—considerable regard for you, but I—I can never love you—at least I think not—as I loved *him*!" She choked a little over the allusion. "Would it—oh, pray, pray reflect!—would it not be a dreadful thing to marry a girl—to have a wife who——"

"Who is the sweetest, the dearest, the prettiest girl under the sun? No! A thousand times, NO!"

I kissed her, Usurper that I was! I put my arm around her slight, submissive waist, and after the first recoil, she let it rest there peacefully. We sat a little while longer on the top of Primrose Hill, and then went home—on the top of the omnibus—an engaged couple. We had tea together that evening in Mrs. Toms' sitting-room, and under the auspices of that maternal person. And I felt no remorse; I gloried in my treachery. And that night, when I retired to bed, I summoned the shade of Johnson-Williams, and broke the news to him.

XXI

"You will excuse me, my dear Pegley, but I cannot—I can *not* believe it!"

Sitting on my bolster, with my elbows on my knees, and my chin propped between my fists, I looked in his face—as much as was left of it—and laughed defiantly.

"Wait!"

His ragged outlines wavered; he turned on me the faint lamps of his astral eyes and shook his shadowy head.

"I have studied your character closely during the years that we have been associated," he said, "and I have no hesitation in saying that you are incapable of meanness or treachery. You have told Gwendollen—for what reason I cannot imagine—a most extraordinary story! You have asked her to consider yourself in the light of her future husband, and obtained her partial consent. Now you deliberately summon me and assure me that you are going to make her your wife, and defy me, as a mere wandering, bodiless Third Principle, to interfere. Had I less faith in you, Pegley, such an announcement would drive me to the last pitch of desperation. But I see through your pretence. I know you better than you

know yourself. Look the thing in the face. Suppose you were travelling in the desert and met a wandering Arab whose only sustenance was a single date and a drop of water, you wouldn't—you couldn't deprive the man of what meant a few more hours of life to him? I am like that Arab, my dear fellow, and Gwendollen is my fate—my drop of water! If you will look at the situation from my point of view you will agree with me that to take advantage of my helpless condition to rob me of her would be a mean thing, a base thing, a despicable thing, and that nothing could possibly induce you to do it!"

"Yet I am going to do it!"

"Take time, my dear fellow," pleaded my unhappy friend. "You know my favourite recipe for composing the mind. Run over the Merchant Shipping List, or the clauses of the Tonnage Act, before you make a positive reply, for my sake!"

I emphasized my words, spoken very calmly and distinctly, with beats of my right forefinger upon my left palm.

"I tell you again, my mind is made up. I have behaved like a villain—I mean to behave like a blackguard before I have done. I have slandered you—purposely. I have deceived Miss Williams-Johnson—deliberately. To-morrow I mean to have your name erased from the marriage licence and my own put in its place. And before another fortnight is over, Gwendollen will be my wife."

He flickered with passionate agitation.

"She shall not! I will go to her—this instant. I will warn her—tell her all!"

I sneered superior.

"Go if you like, but your efforts to interview her will be in vain. She has dismissed you from her mind; burned your letters. She will decline to enter into any conversation with or receive any visits from the astral

personality of a sweetheart"—I laughed triumphantly—"who had jilted her, heartlessly for a Thibetan lady of two hundred years of age."

Johnson-Williams paled and faded, but he recovered himself sufficiently to speak.

"It—it is incredible! that you—that you should have turned Gwendollen against me. That she should have stooped to believe such a cock-and-bull story—for it is a cock-and-bull story, Pegley!—is bewilderingly incomprehensible. But I—I will be patient. I will try to believe that you have some excellent motive"—I laughed again, malignantly—"at the bottom of all this. You have purposely misrepresented yourself, but it is no use—no use at all. You couldn't be a villain, Pegley, my dear fellow, you couldn't indeed!"

"SCAT!"

The fellow's persistent belief in me had irritated me past bearing. With a violent effort of will-power, I extinguished him, and sinking back upon my pillow, slept the sleep of the just. Next morning I awoke bright as the proverbial button—a breathing, sentient proof to the contrary of the assertion that the wicked man cannot possibly be a happy one. Bent as I was upon making Gwendollen my own at the earliest possible date, it may be easily believed that I set at once about the necessary preparations. I began by applying for three weeks' leave of absence from the office. And, as a new book-keeper had been temporarily obtained in the place of Johnson-Williams, poor wretch! and in consideration of my having, previously to his advent, performed much of the extra duty that the absence of my betrayed friend entailed upon the rest of the working staff—my request was granted. Then I bought a new licence, carefully putting the old one away in a pigeon-hole of my bureau, with a kind of feeling that it would be unlucky to use it—and gave the necessary notice to the incumbent of the parish.

In a few days more Gwendollen—oh! dizzying thought!—would be my own. My own; whom neither man nor ghost should ever take from me. And as soon as the hymeneal knot was fairly tied, we were to start for Margate—Margate at the end of June is both healthful and delightful—while Mrs. Toms—who had been in a permanent condition of pleasing agitation designated by herself as “the twitters” ever since the announcement of our engagement—performed the sleight-of-hand feat designated by herself as “throwing two combination-bed-and-sittings into one sweet!”

And I got myself measured for the first superfine frock-coat I had ever contemplated wearing, with other essentials on a corresponding scale of magnificence. It may be imagined that I was kept pretty well employed by the cares inseparable to my approaching change of condition—and the necessity of keeping Gwendollen’s mind employed.

To keep Gwendollen’s mind employed, her thoughts diverted! It was a poignant necessity. The regular sights of the metropolis being by this time completely exhausted, I had invested in an *Historical Guide to London*—a publication which no one needs more than the born cockney, who has never spent three weeks out of sound of Bow Bells in his life; and I was in hopes, as I whirled Gwendollen from one memorable spot to another, that the resources of the volume to which I so desperately clung might not be exhausted before our wedding-day.

But Fate was against me. The long-dreaded moment came! Upon the very morning of the eve of the day that was to make Gwendollen my own forever, I realised that there was nothing more left to see. It was ten o’clock on a Friday morning; twenty-four hours yet remained to be filled up. And what—what was I to fill them up with?

We sat at breakfast together in Mrs. Toms’ sitting-

room. That estimable female had poured out our coffee, and quitted the apartment with an elaborate delicacy of manner. Gwendollen made no effort to detain her. It was I—I who could have found it in my heart to ask her to stop, for the silence maintained with regard to Johnson-Williams by his pseudo-*fiancée* from the moment of the revelation upon Primrose Hill until now, was, I felt, about to be broken, and my invention, I felt, would not be up to supplying any demands that might be made upon it in the way of biographical details regarding Her Highness the Princess Sankaracharya or the geographical formation of Thibet. My inventive genius had deserted me—I knew, I felt. Indeed, the frenzy of mendacity which overpowered me on the occasion previously recorded, was my single experience of the kind. I have been truthful, to the verge of dulness, ever since.

The words came at last. . . .

XXII

Yes, the words came! I had seen them glowing in her eyes—poor blue eyes! they seemed to have cried a good deal in the last few weeks—and on her lips.

"How long does it take a vessel—a steamship—to reach Calcutta?"

"About a month."

She leaned her round chin upon her white palm and pondered.

"You are neglecting your breakfast," I suggested.

"I don't want any!" she answered, rather curtly, and again pursued her train of thought in silence. Which she broke a few moments later, by saying:

"I hope Llewellyn's body will get there safely."

"No doubt," I responded, with inward quakings. "The freight-agents will take care of that."

"I suppose so," she assented. "And yet there are

dangers which carefulness does not always avert. White ants, for instance." She shuddered inexpressibly. "One never takes up a book about travels in India, without reading something about the ravages of white ants. But she will take all needful precautions, I suppose, knowing the country—at least, she ought to know it, as she is a native!"

"Who?" I asked blandly.

"Sankaracharya, of course," responded Gwendollen.

"Oh! Sankaracharya!" I echoed stupidly. My mind was anxiously employed in sorting out a scheme—in compiling a pretext by which my bride-elect's attention might be diverted from the undesirable subject. But I couldn't hit on one. The well of invention seemed to have run dry.

"I suppose she is very brown," Gwendollen continued.

"Quite coffee-coloured, perhaps."

"Quite coffee-coloured!"

"I thought so!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "I bought a book all about Thibet yesterday, and nearly all last night—I have not slept a wink lately"—she sighed—"I lay awake pondering over what I had read in it. I looked up the subject of Buddhist priestesses, the very first thing, and"—she produced the back of an envelope scribbled over with pencil notes—"this is the kind of costume they wear. A scarlet mitre-shaped head-dress, gilt on the top, a yellow sheepskin mantle, short petticoats, only reaching as far as the knees—striped with different colours, and to finish up with—a nose-ring and a pair of green top-boots." She waited a moment to let the description soak in. "Well?" she ejaculated impatiently.

I smiled what I felt to be a feeble smile.

"I—I should think it must be——"

"Awful!" interrupted Gwendollen. (I had been on the point of insanely saying "very becoming.")

"You are quite right, Edward." (She had never called me Edward of her own free will before.) "Awful! I should think so. And the man who could allow himself to be captured by such a creature must be mad! M-mad!"

In another moment she would have begun to cry. I seized the newspaper in despair—it was the first thing I could think of—and handed it hurriedly across the table. "Have you seen the news about——" I slurred and mumbled, "if you haven't, you ought to. Wonderfully interesting and vivid. Gives quite a new view of the case."

"I don't know what case you mean," replied my *fiancée*—(how could she when I didn't?)—"unless you are talking about that tiresome cataleptic creature at——"

She broke off in surprise. "You haven't half finished breakfast," she cried, "so what are you saying grace for?"

I had bowed my head in thankfulness for an idea which might prove *my* salvation, in the matter of distracting Gwendollen's mind.

"Yes, we will go. A nice long journey there; a nice long journey back. Saved!"

"I beg your pardon?" Gwendollen interrogated.

I said, recovering myself: "Of course, reading about the cataleptic case in Chelsea is dull work. To appreciate the thing properly it has to be seen."

"O-oh!" ejaculated Gwendollen, with a little pout of disgust. "I wouldn't look at such a thing *for the world!*"

"My dear girl," I responded, assuming a tone of almost husband-like authority, "you don't mean that you wouldn't really? You only think you wouldn't. It is an experience which for my sake, for your own, for that of others, perhaps, you ought to undergo."

"Why? You're dreadfully puzzling sometimes," said Gwendollen, "and this is one of the times. You aren't a catalepser"

"Cataleptic!" I corrected.

"And I'm sure I'm not. And I don't know anybody else who is. And if you knew how dreadfully I feel at the bare idea of seeing the horrid creature, you wouldn't talk about it any more."

"This is folly," I said gravely, "which your cooler judgment will condemn as mine does now. I will not argue any more—in such a clear case of absolute—ahem!—I will plead. To oblige me, my dear girl!"—I gnashed my teeth at my own stupidity in using a term of endearment so commonly employed by *him*!—"To oblige me, come and see the Cataleptic Man. I cannot—I really cannot take a refusal. You are aware," I went on, recalling to mind a disintegrated fragment of the original editorial notice of the case, "you are aware that the word *Katalepsis* in the original Greek, means taking possession of——"

"I did not know it," Gwendollen retorted, "but asking me to oblige you in the original English, seems to mean that I must go whether I like or not." She tossed her pretty head rather rebelliously, and went upstairs to put her hat on. In ten minutes more we started. It was, as I had anticipated, rather a long jolting journey. There were a number of dingy little back streets to wind in and out of, before we reached Biggs Street, which proved by far the dingiest of all. I did not feel cheerful as I glanced down the vista it presented—it certainly was not the kind of thoroughfare a young lady would care to perambulate, even with a male escort. The public-house—I must have been mad to think of taking Gwendollen to a public-house—was a low-browed, scowling, wooden-fronted tavern, opposing a baker's shop of clean and cheerful aspect. The baker's shop, together with a glimpse I had of a clean and cheerful woman behind the counter, and a police-constable patrolling the pavement outside, suggested the idea that Gwendollen should

wait there in safety, while I tested the respectability of the "Pink Lion" before allowing her to place her foot upon its threshold. So having seen her deposited in a clean Windsor chair by the clean counter of the bakery, being smiled upon by the clean bakeress, and stared at by the bakeress's clean children, I crossed the street, pushed open the swing-doors of the public-house and entered.

Public interest in the Cataleptic Wonder appeared to have diminished. Instead of the seething crowd of would-be sightseers described by the rapturous reporter of the *Sunday Intelligencer* the bar only contained a drunken navigator and a miserable-looking woman, holding a baby in her arms, who was trying to persuade him to go home. To her entreaties were added the counsels of the landlord, a bibulous-nosed, large-bodied man, in a white apron and shirt-sleeves.

XXIII

"That's right, M'ria," the landlord observed paternally, as the miserable woman, using the baby apparently as a battering-ram, half dragged, half hustled her sodden spouse into the open air; "tyke 'im aw'y. 'E's spent orl 'is money, an' we don't want 'im 'ere. Wot's for you, sir?"

He leaned across the counter and adjusted a large greasy smile to the size of his face, which was also large and greasy.

"You have," I said, throwing down twopence to pay for the beer I was firmly determined not to drink, "you have a cataleptic gentleman here whose case has created a great deal of interest?"

The landlord's large face lost its smile. He knocked on the counter with the bottom of a pint pot and roared for "Chally," who appeared, in the person of a smutty-faced boy.

"'Ere you! Go and wake up Professor Pargeter—'e's asleep in the club-room—an' tell 'im 'ere's a gent come to look at the catalepser." Chally vanished. Turning to me, the landlord resumed: "The Professor's the medical gent wot watches the case. 'E keeps the key of the room where Old Snoozelum—we calls the catalepser Old Snoozelum by way of a joke—'angs out. You'll 'ave to pay a bob to see 'im—it's wrote up there."

He indicated a fly-blown notice-card stuck up on the shelf behind him among the bottles, and yawned comprehensively, as if to indicate satiation with the novelty my soul thirsted to see.

"We've 'ad 'im a long time," he said, checking the yawn—which threatened to partly decapitate him—with one huge, dingy paw, "an' the public intrress is fallin' orf more than a bit. At first it was nothink but 'urry-scurry, with newspaper gents—as are gen'rally a thusty lot—an' bettin' gents, as is thustier—an' the common yerd, pushin' an' scramblin' to get at 'im, and nab locks of 'is 'air for keepsakes, or chip bits orf 'is features—as they would 'a' done if we 'adn't kep' a sharp look-out—" I pointed to my untasted beer, as he paused, expressively, and emptying the pewter at a single gulp, he went on: "But that was weeks an' weeks ago, an' 'e ain't no nearer wakin' up than 'e was at the beginnin', to jedge by his looks. An' me and my missus are getting sick of the 'ole lay. Out o' pocket for the rent o' 'is room, for one think—as 'e can't up an' pay us afore 'e wakes; an' the Professor—'is actin' manager, as e' calls 'isself—keeps a tight 'old on the box."

"The box?" I repeated.

"Ah!" the landlord nodded solemnly. "When fust 'e come yeer, we nailed a money-box—'Orspital Sund'y size—to the wooden mankel-piece at the 'ead of 'is bed, because I don't take no 'count of professors or actin' managers—I've rubbed up agin' that kind o' cattle

afore." He buttonholed me across the counter with a dirty finger, and went on, breathing samples of his own stock upon me, and blinking in the light of the single flaming gas-jet, like a kind of featherless owl. "Nails it on the chimbley-piece, we does. And every individual as comes to see the catalepser, 'e drops 'is bob into that box—to which there ain't no key, but to open you must take an' bust it with a poker or sich. And me and the Professor each has a key, to the room, but neither of us ain't to enter it without the other—unless 'e can. But the Professor, 'e's too fly for me; and I'm too 'anky for 'im, if it comes to that." He laid his bulbous forefinger against his bulbous nose; he winked a wink of alcoholic significance, as the door of the little bar-parlour opened and the Professor appeared upon its threshold.

My first impression was, that the reporter of the *Sunday Telegraph* had not been accurate in his description of the Professor. My second, that the Professor had, in a manner of speaking, gone to seed since the decline of those flowery days of popular patronage which had greeted the first appearance of the Cataleptic Wonder.

He wore no shining suit of professional black, but a tweed shooting jacket, villainously greasy and out at elbows, and a pair of short brown trousers from which protruded a pair of large feet in dirty striped socks, garnished with soiled red morocco slippers. He was innocent of linen; wore a pink handkerchief knotted tightly about his coarse neck, and an oleaginous black velvet smoking cap on the back of his large shaggy head. When I add that his cheeks and chin bristled with a beard of several weeks' growth; that his nose was inflamed from the same causes that induced redness in the landlord's; and that he appeared to have slept in his clothes for a protracted period, I have, to all intents and

purposes, completed the description of Professor Pargeter.

"This yeer," said the landlord, indicating me with a wave of a dirty hand, "is the gent as 'as called to see our Cataleptic Wonder. Sir—name unknowed" (with a gleam of humour)—"Professor Pargeter."

The Professor bowed and genteelly repressing an imminent hiccough, said: "Stremely gladsher meeshim—shooah! Sharge" (with a tremendous effort), "wun shillun!"

I produced a shilling from my waistcoat pocket. The landlord lifted up the zinc-covered counter flap and invited me to pass into the bar. I did so, without one intuition—oh, fool!—of what was about to befall. The Professor, with some difficulty, executed a right-about face; I fell into rank behind him: the landlord, after hailing "Chally" and bidding him mind the bar, fell in behind me, and away I was marched like a theatrical captive between two guards, on the way to execution. We crossed the dirty little parlour back of the bar, fell out of a narrow doorway down three steps, climbed six, and paused upon a dark, little strip of landing about the size of a tea-tray. A key rattled in the lock—a door swung back. I had penetrated to the interior of the casket which contained the Cataleptic Wonder.

The room was small and close, containing nothing but a small bedstead, a chair, and a chest of drawers. Upon the bedstead was stretched a recumbent figure, the death-like rigidity of which caused me a momentary shudder. Such light as made its way into the chamber was filtered through a dirty white window blind, so that, while broad generalities were to be distinguished, details remained unseen.

"You shee beforeyou," began Professor Pargeter balancing himself in an upright position and carefully extending an indicatory right arm towards the inanimate

subject of his lecture, "wunsha *mosh*—moshramarshable cash—caseshonrecordish of condish', cashalepsh, protrash'—protrash forperiod nearl' twomunsh—hic!"

"Doorin' which time," said the landlord's voice from behind me, repeating what was evidently a familiar formula, "the subjec' 'as not partook of no nourishment wotever. If you was to fire cannons in 'is yeer, or insert 'airpins in his body, sich heffiks would be inadekit to arouse 'm from 'is happythetic conditions."

"You will perapshask," resumed the Professor, who seemed to resent the landlord's interference, "whesh no injoosh resush mi'—mi' beantishipash from sho protracted periosh abshinensh? Medical shiensh ansh No! No!" He nearly tilted himself over with the violent stress he laid on the negative. "I repeash, No!"

"Beyond a wisible wastin' of the hadipost 'issues," continued the landlord from behind, "wich materially increases the attentooation of the subjec', an' the pallig yew of 'is features, there is nothin' to shrink from in the haspik of the Cataleptic Wonder. There is even majisty in 'is calm attitude, remindin' to the observer of Napolyum at Saint 'Eleener. 'E wears a smile upon 'is lips, as though revertin' in his dreams to the 'appy days of child'ood."

"Can't you draw up the blind?" I said. "I can see nothing plainly."

XXIV

Compliantly the landlord creaked across the floor. The blind flapped and rotated on its roller. Daylight poured into the stuffy room, now just revealed to the observer in all its dinginess and showed me . . . lying there . . .

"JOHNSON-WILLIAMS!"

"Did you speak, sir?" queried the landlord, while the Professor, blinking in the light, like some unsavoury kind of night-bird, demanded:

"Whasheshay?"

I was fortunate enough to be able to hide my agitation—I was inventive enough to produce a lie.

"I merely said 'Jerusalem!' The gentleman looked so very—very dead!"

"I 'arf b'lieve 'e *his*, sometimes!" the landlord muttered, while the Professor admonished him in an equally audible aside.

"Shushup!!!"

I grasped the foot-rail of the bedstead in both hands, and with a mighty effort, steadied my whirling brain, and forced my thumping heart to beat less furiously. I turned to the two men. I addressed the inebriate Professor—the long-sought, but now discovered, Doctor George.

"I am (I omitted to mention the fact before) a medical student." This falsehood, framed on the spur of the moment, was fated to be the last of the series. "The case is extremely interesting, and I should like to examine the subject more closely. If you will consent to leave me alone with him for the space of a quarter of an hour, I will put into this box upon the mantelpiece"—towards which the landlord directed an expressive eye—"ten shillings instead of the single one which you are accustomed to charge to visitors."

Professor Pargeter and the landlord looked at one another.

"Qui' shafe," the Professor commented. "Bosh nailsh shimpiece!"

"And the winder screwed up," rejoined the landlord, "as was done to purvent any outside party as took a interest in the inside of the Cataleptic Wonder's collectin' box, gettin' in that way one fine night. So we're safe in strikin' a bargain. Done with you! For ten bob!"

"Allri'!" agreed the Professor. He reeled, the landlord rolled, out of the room and shut the door.

Left alone, I walked to the bedside. I gazed upon the corporeal tenement of the friend I had betrayed. He was unchanged, though preceptibly thinner; and though it was evident he had not been dusted for some time, there were no marks of rough usage on his face or person. His boots stood upon the chest-of-drawers, as if they had been a curious pair of fossils; his shabby coat hung over a chair; his linen had yellowed with the passage of time; his nickel watch-chain had tarnished for want of rubbing; but it was the same old Johnson-Williams. Should I leave him to his fate, I argued with my evil demon, as I stood by his bedside? Should I go upon my heartless way?—crown my treachery by marrying Gwendollen and being happy ever afterwards?—for in the poetical justice of remorse I had ceased to believe! Or should I call him back to himself; restore all that Fate and I had taken from him; be best man at his wedding, and die eventually of a broken heart within a decent interval? I don't know how long I should have gone on revolving the *pros* and *cons* of the question. I don't know which side of the balance would have kicked the beam had not Johnson-Williams saved me the trouble by sneezing violently and opening his eyes. In another instant he sat up, regarded me intently, and exclaimed, as he held out his hand:

"You see I was right. I *knew* you could not be a villain, my dear Pegley, in spite of all your assertions to the contrary. And now tell me where I am, and how you managed to trace me to my—in point of fact, my Lair?"

The next ten minutes were occupied with explanations, interrogations, and replies. We must have raised our voices incautiously, because, many minutes before the expiration of the purchased quarter-hour, heavy foot-

steps creaked cautiously upon the staircase and stopped upon the landing, whilst heavy breathing sounded outside the door, which—the key having been left inside—I had locked.

"The landlord," I whispered to Johnson-Williams, "and Doctor George."

He bit his lips and his thin face flushed.

"We must face them and have it out, my dear Pegley," he whispered. "Give me a minute to put my boots on, help me into my coat, for I feel a little weak and giddy" (it would have been queer, I thought, if he did not), "and then unlock the door."

I did as he asked and flipped off some of the dust that had accumulated upon the cornices, ledges and projections of his anatomy, with my pocket-handkerchief. I had hardly finished doing so, when a tremendous blow caused the door to quiver on its hinges.

"Now then!" roared the landlord in stentorian accents, "wot's goin' on in 'eer? Wot do you mean by lockin' the bloomin' door, an' talkin' to yourself like a Punch and Judy? If any 'arm's done to the Catalepser, you'll 'ave to pay for it. D'yeer? Come out o' that afore I busts in the door!" Another thump. "Come out, you meddlin' young sawbones!"

I glanced at Johnson-Williams. He was standing lank, tall and upright, at the foot of the bed. His fists were clenched; his lips set with unusual sternness. Perhaps the thought of Gwendollen inspired him—Gwendollen, in the baker's shop over the way, waiting for me; wondering at my delay—guessing what caused it. I swallowed down the lump that rose in my throat at the recollection. In obedience to a nod from my friend—who seemed to assume the lead, quite naturally—I unlocked the door and threw it open. I anticipated an inrush and prepared to receive it, without pausing to calculate the effect the appearance of the Cataleptic Wonder, revived and on

his legs, might have upon the landlord of the "Pink Lion" and Professor Pargeter.

The effect was a magnificent one. With a wild yell of horror, the Professor, who pot-valiantly led the charge, bounded backwards, upsetting the landlord, who followed close upon his heels. They must have rolled together down the six steps that led to the room, for going out upon the landing and looking down, I saw them lying in a very tangled condition at the bottom.

"Come," I said hurriedly to Johnson-Williams. "We must run for it." I prepared to lead the way, but he stopped me.

"I do not leave this place, my dear Pegley, after all I have undergone in it—without my property."

XXV

"Your property?" I repeated blankly. "What property?"

As Johnson-Williams pointed to the money-box upon the mantelpiece, and seized the poker, a light burst upon me. The box bore an inscription, in staggering letters of white paint:

"FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CATALEPTIC WONDER"

"If that money is not mine, my dear Pegley," said Johnson-Williams, "I never earned a penny in my life." He swung the poker aloft, and with a greater display of power than I should have expected him to manifest, smashed in the lid.

The sound of breaking wood and jingling coins seemed to animate the craven spirits on the staircase with a desperate accession of boldness. The landlord began to shout "Thieves!"—the Professor to swear horribly, whilst the hoarse voice of the bar-boy, Chally, and the shriller accents of a female—presumably the landlady—were heard enquiring into the cause of the disturbance,

and suggesting that a policeman should be fetched. The crisis demanded action. Stepping out upon the landing, I looked down upon the aggressive group below, and said loudly:

"Send for a policeman if you like. The sooner the better for us; the sooner the worse for you. Rascal!"—I turned my indignant gaze downwards upon the inflamed countenance of the Professor—"who under the name of Doctor George kidnapped the body—the living body of this gentleman—my friend"—I waved my hand in the direction of Johnson-Williams—"from his address at 26, Great Joram Street, two months ago! Rogue!"—I turned my attention to the landlord, whose flabby countenance was streaked with alarm and perspiration—"Rogue, who received and harboured that body, knowing it to have been nefariously obtained——"

"Which he never!" shrilled the landlady.

"The Law will deal with you according to your deserts. Penal servitude—probably for life—is the mildest sentence you may expect! Dare to attempt violence"—the landlord had begun to turn up his sleeves—"and I break the bedroom window and blow this police whistle"—I produced one from my pocket, which I had carried about with me for years without ever being called upon to use it—"till every constable in Chelsea comes about your ears."

"And while they are coming," put in Johnson-Williams, "we will barricade this room door with the bedstead, and defy you through the keyhole to do your worst."

The latter threat did not appear to me a very terrible one; but a silence ensued upon it, and a muttered colloquy of short duration took place between the Professor and the landlord. Then the latter called upstairs in a would-be conciliatory tone:

"Gents!"

"Well," we answered.

"Look 'ere. Me and the Professor 'as got a word to say. Can't this 'ere difference be squared?"

"Squared?" echoed Johnson-Williams.

"Settled. I don't want no constables 'eer—I don't," continued the landlord. "I've got a character to lose and a license to keep. Let's come up an' palaaver."

I held a short consultation with Johnson-Williams.

"You may come up," I said, "but alone and unarmed. Hold your hands above your head"—I shook the poker, which I had borrowed from Johnson-Williams, warningly—"so that we may be quite sure you intend no foul play. Now then!"

And the landlord came up.

He looked funny enough, holding his arms in the prescribed position, while endeavouring to staunch the effusion from a bleeding nose—dealt him by the elbow of the Professor—with a dirty shirt-sleeve.

"Gents," he said, as soon as he recovered breath enough to speak—for his fall had shaken him considerably, and he was by nature an asthmatic, pursy kind of man—"gents, I don't deny you 'ave us on the 'ip, as the sayin' is. But, though things looks bad agin me, I ain't such a reg'lar bad 'un as the Professor." He wiped his tearful eyes and his bleeding nose with the other shirt-sleeve, and went on: "I don't deny I've kep' 'is company an' give in to 'is persuasions, but it's laid 'eavy on my conscience the 'ole time. When he drove up to my privit door, quite sober, in a cab one night, an' sent for me round from the bar and told me as 'e'd collared a catalepsy an' meant to 'ave a show, and share the dibs the public 'ud pay to see the corpuss"—Johnson-Williams turned his head indignantly—"I did my best to argey 'im out of it. 'It ain't a 'onest act, George——'"

"Then his name is George?"

"One of 'is names," sniffed the landlord; "but between me an' you, 'e's got a plenty of *aliases* to pick and choose

from. A bad lot, a reg'lar bad lot, an' my shame it is I ever took up with 'im. 'George,' I says, that night, 'do reflectuate, George! This is a wrong thing, George, and will bring no luck.' Then 'e says: 'W'en we comes for to divide the swag'—an Apollyum 'e is in the temptin' line—'w'en we comes to divide the swag, you'll sing a different toon, old cockyolly-bird.' 'But, George,' I says, 'Wot are we to do with the gen'lemen w'en 'e wakes up?' 'Ho!' 'e says, 'there'll be time to think of that when he does wake up.' But all along it's laid 'eavy on my mind—an' even keepin' a key to the door, an' settin' Chally to watch on the landin' o' nights, ain't been no relief to my feelin's: for George 'e kep' puttin' off dividin' the money from day to day, an' I've knowed as 'e were only watchin' 'is opportunity to bolt with the 'ole lump."

"Sixty-five pounds in silver," said Johnson-Williams, producing a heavy bundle tied up in a coarse towel. Methodical fellow! He had counted the contents of the box and packed it conveniently for portorage, even while I had been parleying on the stairs.

"Sixty-five! I made sure there was more," groaned the landlord. "George must a' found some way o' gettin' at it, in spite of me tryin' to keep 'im content with drink, and watchin' 'im like the apple o' my hi! Sixty-five! Now if you two gents was to take thirty-two ten, betwixt you, an' 'and me over the rest, I should be quite satisfied—I should indeed."

"And of course you will divide with us the handsome profits realised over the sale of drinks to the thousands of individuals who have, within the last two months, crowded to your house, to inspect the gentleman whom you illegally assisted to kidnap and make an exhibition of?" I suggested.

The landlord's jaw dropped.

"You had better make no more demands," I said, "lest we lose patience. If you escape—through our leniency—

prosecution and imprisonment for the outrage you have perpetrated upon the most susceptible feelings of a harmless gentleman, you may consider yourself lucky. The money is his, and he intends to keep it."

"Intends to keep it," echoed Johnson-Williams, lovingly cuddling the heavy bundle.

"And ain't I to be paid my rent for the room as you've occkypied for nigh on ten weeks past?" demanded the crestfallen landlord.

"Not one stiver," I said decidedly.

"Not the half of one," echoed Johnson-Williams.

"Then I'm beat," said the landlord, "and throws up my 'ands." He let them drop heavily at his sides as he spoke.

XXVI

"That is enough," I said. "Now go downstairs before us."

"Wot! Ain't you goin' to 'ave it out with the Professor?" queried the landlord.

"With the Professor," I answered sternly, "we have nothing to do, except to hand him over to the authorities if he endeavours to molest us."

And still grasping the poker, and followed by my recovered friend, bearing the weighty mass of shillings, I descended the short staircase. We turned into the little bar-parlour, where we found the landlord's wife in hysterics, undergoing vigorous ministrations on the part of the boy Chally and a grimy little servant maid, and entered the bar. As we did so, a tall figure staggered forward and endeavoured to prevent our egress.

It was the Professor, who had been steadying his nerves, inwardly, by the absorption of more alcohol, and outwardly by a liberal application of cold water. He held a battered stethoscope in one hand, as a direct illus-

tration of his medical attainments, I suppose, and a long slip of dirty paper in the other.

"One momensh!" He stretched out the stethoscope impressively. "Before you leave shish philanshropic—opic roofsh"—he addressed himself particularly to Johnson-Williams—"I—hic!—demandsh tobeyerd! Tobeyerd! The ingrashisood—humanashurish proverbial"—he shook his drunken head with solemnity—"bushimashy in whole coursh my life sho flagram—flagram cashi nev' met. Nev'!" Here he began to shed tears. "I foun' a total-teetotal shrangeish in shate cashalepshish, an' took shat shrangerish in. I roush public in'ris in behalf shat mansh! I raish shubscripshush for fan's benefish. How doesh 'at mansh rirurn kinnish? Waksh up, an' endeavoursh take Frensh leave. Copsh sh'swagsh, without one thought for man—man who befrenned him." He dried his tears with the end of his draggled neckerchief, and went on: "When man dosh at, though my art may bleedsh, I ussher no reproach. I shtand upon fair bashish—phil—philanshopy." He staggered wildly. "I shay Human Nashur hash in person shish man desheived me. I am berrayed, calumniarided, bush I bear no malsh' at mansh. I mere—merely offer 'at mansh My Bill."

He waved the dirty slip of paper frantically in the face of Johnson-Williams. My pacific friend was roused at last. To be presented by the drunken medical villain who had kidnapped him, with an account for attendance! It was too much. He dealt the Professor an energetic shove with the bundle of money in the sensitive regions situated behind the middle buttons of the waistcoat, and had the satisfaction of seeing him collapse, gaspingly, upon a pile of spittoons.

As we shook the sawdust of the "Pink Lion" from the soles of our boots for ever, he scrambled up again. His lofty mood had changed. He implored us, with tears, to return and hear the sad story of his life. He had been

a wrongdoer, he said, but the demon who had tempted him to his fall was the landlord, and he was ready to expose and denounce him for the small sum of five pounds cash. We did not accept his offer. Fate has never thrown either of those two scoundrels in our way since then. The only light that ever shone upon their subsequent career was turned on a few days later by a reporter belonging to the staff of the *Sunday Intelligencer*:

"POLICE INTELLIGENCE

"CHELSEA—BEFORE MR. PINCHING HATSHER.

"Amusing Affray in a Public-House.—WILLIAM BULGER, landlord of the 'Pink Lion' public-house, Biggs Street, and GEORGE HENRY HAMILTON WASHINGTON PARGETER (an alleged Professor of an American medical university, and the person who obtained a considerable amount of credit for philanthropic efforts in raising a public subscription for the Cataleptic Wonder, who, it will be remembered, was on exhibition at the 'Pink Lion'), were charged by Constables Rickards and Tinley with drunkenness, violent conduct and the use of abusive language on the above-named premises, on the afternoon of the —th. The constables being questioned, said that they found a crowd assembled round the door of the 'Pink Lion.' The landlord and the 'Professor,' both in an evident state of intoxication, were rolling on the floor, pummelling one another. They separated them with difficulty.—MR. PINCHING HATSHER: What was the cause of the quarrel?—CONSTABLE RICKARDS: It seems the Cataleptic Wonder, after lying insensible for over a month at the 'Pink Lion,' come to his self and hooked it with the money-box that very morning.—MR. PINCHING HATSHER:

Whose money-box?—CONSTABLE TINLEY: His own! It was put by his bedside for people to drop contributions in.—MR. PINCHING HATSHER: Then these men, apparently, intended to divert the result of the public collection to their own uses, and fought when they found that the man had made sure of his own? (Here one of the prisoners was understood to say something about philanthropy.)—MR. PINCHING HATSHER: Yes, there is a great deal of your kind of philanthropy going about (*laughter*). I shall fine you each ten shillings. In default of payment, you can go to prison and take your philanthropy with you (*more laughter*). The money was paid and the men left the court, but before they were out of the precincts the Professor, who it appears, has long been ‘wanted’ by the American police for complicity in a series of impudent swindles, was arrested on an extradition warrant.”

Need I describe the scene that took place in the little baker’s shop, when Johnson-Williams and I tumbled in together? How I, after handing the astonished bakeress five shillings, induced her to retire into her private parlour, locked the shop-door to keep out possible intruders, and went into the business of explanation, with the desperate resolve to make a clean breast of it. How Gwen-dollen, after emptying the vials of her wrath upon the innocent head of her lover—of her rightful lover—was taken faint, and had to be revived with milk out of the pail on the counter, while Johnson-Williams—who had certainly a good right to the possession of an appetite after a two months’ fast—perpetrated fearful ravages upon the relays of rolls that had just come up smoking hot from the oven, and felt very ill afterwards, in consequence! Useless! Impossible! No pen, wielded by a human being in possession of ordinary powers, could

do justice to the scene, which attained its wildest pitch of indescribability, when both Johnson-Williams and Gwendollen absolutely refused to credit *my* assurance that I had thoroughly intended to play the villainous rôle I had set down for myself, to the bitter end. Nothing I could say could convince them. Nothing! To this day, my friend and his wife believe me—in spite of my reiterated assurances to the contrary—to be the most noble, modest, unselfish, generous of men. They hold me up as a model before their children. As long as I live, I, unworthy, shall continue to be lauded, blessed and praised by those two people. And when I die, they will mourn me deeply—sincerely—though I don't deserve it.

XXVII

We released the bakeress from her back-parlour by-and-by, paid for the rolls and milk, hailed a passing four-wheeler, and were driven home.

We dined together. Johnson-Williams—to whom I gave up my room—retired early, feeling weak and overdone: while I went round and paid his rent and took away his few goods, and fewer garments, from 26, Great Joram Street. I was not communicative, but reserved, and to this day, the landlady does not know what was the ultimate fate of the lodger who was kidnapped by the ingenious—and as ingenuous “Doctor George.”

We had the wedding the next day. It was lucky I had kept Gwendollen's purchased licence by me! I gave away the bride, who was married with the ring I had bought, and stood best man to the bridegroom, who wore the superfine coat I had ordered for my *own* wedding! I kept the trousers, as they were so much too short.

Subsequently, we breakfasted at a restaurant, because Mrs. Toms could not be brought to understand the situation, or regard Johnson-Williams in any other light than

that of an interloper, who had stepped in at the last moment and robbed me of my bride. And herself of a let, because the "two combined bed and sittings" were never "thrown into one sweet" after all.

But it was a pleasant wedding breakfast. I believe pleasanter than if it had been my own, and when Johnson-Williams looked at me over his second glass of champagne—I had dedicated the first to the health of the new-made bride—and said—leaning across the table—and speaking in a low tone—because of the other people in the room—that he had a Toast to propose—I smothered the shrieks of my conscience as well as I could and let him go on.

"Our Benefactor." They both looked at me, with grateful glittering eyes. "To the friend who has proved himself so staunch——"

"No!" I interposed.

"So leal!"

"Pray——"

"So unselfish!"

"Oh!" I groaned, "so disinterestedly generous!"

"So sincere, true, untiring and noble in his efforts on my—on our behalf. I drink to him, and you, my dear girl——"

"I drink to him with all my heart," said Gwendollen.

I writhed in my chair. I was going to utter something aloud, but Johnson-Williams politely prevented me.

"One moment, my dear Pegley. Even your modesty"—my modesty?"—"must yield to my desire to render praise and thanks where both are due. From the first moment of our acquaintance, you accorded me your sympathy and attention. My confidence in you increased. I made your bosom—if I may say so—the Repository of my Aims. When I triumphed over circumstances, and freed myself from trammels—which nothing on earth would ever again induce me to unloose—my first thought,

after communicating my discovery to Gwendollen was to communicate it to you. You heartily congratulated me; and when dreadful Complications ensued—when, lost and wandering, I appealed to you for help and guidance, you nobly responded to the appeal.

“While I live, my dear Pegley, I shall never forget how many miles you walked in search of Doctor George—whom you afterwards discovered in the person of the bibulous blackguard, Professor Pargeter, or how many falsehoods you burdened your upright conscience with, in the endeavours to conceal my unfortunate position from the Heads of the Office, to which I return, with renewed energy, upon next Monday week.”

He sipped a little of the glassful of gas and grape-juice he held, and continued: “In the supreme agony of the conviction that I was wasting away, undiscovered”—he glanced at his left hand and felt his right ear—“you were my consoler. It was you who engaged to meet Gwendollen at the Railway Station; it was you who hit upon a perfectly original and successful plan of diverting her mind from my unhappy self, by inventively persuading her that I was unworthy of her regard—in the matter of Sankaracharya—ha, ha, ha! and proceeding to make love, feigned love, to her yourself. Then, having picked a quarrel with me—and your acting on the occasion does you credit, my dear fellow! though I never *did* believe that you could contemplate the perpetration of anything villainous!—you pursued your researches undisturbed; discovered me, and took immediate steps to restore me to myself and Gwendollen. It is owing to your forethought, boldness and sagacity, that I escaped from that abominable captivity, sound in mind and limb, and moreover, with a handsome sum of ready money—in small silver—honestly earned, too! Words fail, my dear Pegley”—he grasped me warmly by one hand, while Gwendollen

slid her little fingers into the other—"to express our united gratitude to you. We can only say with one voice—being one flesh at last—good friend, God bless you!"

Then we broke up the little party, and Johnson-Williams proudly paid the bill and tipped the waiter, and I saw the happy couple off from St. Paul's Station *en route* for Margate, where, you will perhaps remember, I had already engaged rooms.

Well, well! Their married life has been a very happy one. Johnson-Williams has abandoned Theosophic Buddhism, and attained the eminent position of working partner in the old office where once he kept the books. I have long started on my own account in the ship-broking business line, and command the services of three clerks and a boy. Clients flock to me. I have a reputation for honesty in all my dealings. So much so, that I find it difficult to believe that once in my life, for several days together, I was an absolute scoundrel.

XIII

THE RECTOR'S DUTY

I

IT was Monday morning, and the Reverend Aloysius Cottle, B.A., of Caleb College, Cambridge, was kneeling, very red in the face, upon the prostrate body of a plethoric portmanteau. Mrs. Mivitts, the gouty elderly landlady of the quiet Gower Street apartments, knocked upon the panel of his combined bedchamber and sitting-room with the largest of her chalkstones.

"Come in," cried Reverend Aloysius. On Mrs. Mivitts' partially obeying the command, and explaining that a person wanted to see him:—

"A lady?" he asked anxiously, his eye—he had a fine eye—wandering around the room as though in search of opportunities for concealment.

"Sir, to be frank with you," replied Mrs. Mivitts, settling her thread mittens, "it's a gentleman."

"Tell the gentleman," said the Reverend Aloysius, after hastily rummaging amongst his collection of truthful evasions, "tell the gentleman, please, that Mr. Cottle is particularly engaged just now, but that after six o'clock he will be quite at liberty." He added to himself: "Which is quite true, because I leave Victoria by four o'clock train for Dover, and by six o'clock the white cliffs of Albion will be fading in the steamer's wake. And if I am not at liberty then—when I shall

have left all my worries behind me for six weeks—when shall I be at liberty?”

He gave another tug at the strap, and Mrs. Mivitts lingered. Her triangular face, of the shape and colour of a pound of pale American cheese, and her spare and flattened form remained wedged between the door and the door-jamb. Looking at his widowed landlady more closely, the Reverend Aloysius became aware that she was simpering, and that her cap was disarranged. Instantly, before Mrs. Mivitts had time to utter the fraternal word, he realised that the visitor must be his brother, and his decidedly handsome countenance became overshadowed with foreboding gloom.

“It is—ah—Mr. Alaric?” he began. But a neat half-gray suede glove with a well-cut coat-sleeve attached glided round the waist of Mrs. Mivitts, causing the simper to develop into an hysterical giggle, and over the summit of Mrs. Mivitts’ cap appeared a face exactly like the face of the Reverend Aloysius, only that it was adorned with a waxed moustache instead of an expression of waxy sanctity, and a high, loud, lively voice—the voice of the Reverend Aloysius, deprived of its Gregorian snuffle or Anglican drawl, exclaimed:

“It is, my bucko, and that’s a fact!”

“You—ah! can go, Mrs. Mivitts,” remarked the Reverend Aloysius coldly. He looked on with strong disapproval as Alaric released the widow from his embrace, urging upon her not to promise herself again in marriage before the urger came downstairs. Then he said snappishly:

“Why do you come here? What do you want? If it is money, I haven’t got it to lend. I urgently need a holiday—I am about to take one—and every pound I can scrape goes into that. I should have supposed that our late poor Uncle Digby——”

“Digby was short of chips himself, poor old boy!”

said Alaric cheerfully. He leaned his broad shoulders against the doorpost, tilted back his chin, and thrusting his hands deep down into his pockets looked down upon his clerical twin-brother, as Aloysius, to whom indignation had imparted strength, sternly strapped the port-manteau. "Diggy had been going to the Jews all his life, and when Diggy went to the——"

"Alaric!" exclaimed Aloysius in a deep tone of warning.

"To the Family Vault at Woking"—supplied Alaric—"there wasn't anything left for his adopted boy."

"At any rate Lord Digby *did* adopt you," responded the Reverend Aloysius angrily, washing his hands, "and he settled upon you—I had the information from your own lips—a sum sufficient to bring you an annual income of £500. What did you do with that?" He knew quite well; but he wished, in a pious kind of way, to be aggravating.

"What did I do with it?" pondered Alaric aloud, dreamily twisting his moustache. He closed his eyes in the effort to remember. "Why will you clever fellows put such puzzlin' questions?" he said wearily, opening his eyes again to encounter his twin's indignant glare.

The Reverend Aloysius, in a cold, respectable rage, thrust himself into his coat—a long-tailed High Church garment with a shy retreating collar, and brushed his hair as another man might have sworn—to relieve his feelings.

"I did not invite you here to cross-examine you," the young clergyman said, putting a clean handkerchief in his pocket and hastily concealing his purse. "I have been for the last two months doing duty for the invalid Rector of Mangold Wurzelfield, who is taking a recuperative holiday of some months' duration on the Riviera, and now I am going for a Continental trip with——"

Alaric winked slightly.

"With clergyman's sore throat, which I have contracted through over-exertion in the pulpit," said Aloysius, getting very red. "If I can be of no use to you, Alaric, I should be really very much obliged by your leaving me. You possess a very large circle of sporting acquaintances, of whose society I should not like to deprive you, and——"

"No deprivation, old chap," returned Alaric simply. "It's September—and they're all out o' town."

"Then how comes it that you are in town in September?" queried the Reverend Aloysius.

"Because town in September is the last place where anybody who knows anythin' of me would think of lookin' for me," said Alaric lucidly. "It's necessary for me to keep dark and lie low for a bit, if you must know."

The Reverend Aloysius snorted scornfully. "So it has come to this—that you must hide from your creditors!" he commented. "I thought so! I thought so!"

"That's where you parsons are generally out of it," said Alaric with some disdain. "You're always so bally cocksure! If I want to disappear for a week or so, it isn't to do my creditors in the eye, it's to pay 'em. I've got an investment which is simply bound to turn up trumps before a fortnight's over, and then I shall be able to burst upon these fellows with a dazzling offer of nine-pence in the pound."

"Some gambling Turf venture, I suppose," sneered Aloysius.

"Out of it again!" said Alaric with calm triumph. "It's nothin' to do with the Turf, though I won't go so far as to say it isn't gamblin'. A friend of mine—a chap who's got a head and a half on him—has found out to a dead cert the way to win, nine times out of ten, at the game they call the *petits chevaux*. Homburg and Boulogne and Spa and Aix . . . you'll find the sport flour-

ishin' at all those places. And I've put some capital in this scheme, and he's gone to carry it out—and in two months, mark my words, you'll see him back with the bullion. There's no end to that chap."

"There will not be—yet, I daresay," assented the Reverend Aloysius in a tone which predicted hanging.

"That's your narrow clerical way of lookin' at things," grumbled Alaric. "Never give a layman credit for common decency! If you parsons *are* better than other men—and you're always tellin' us so—you've no excuse for braggin' about it. It's your business—all said and done. Piety and virtue are your stock-in-trade. Look at you now, as serene and self-satisfied as a jackdaw that's hidden a dog's bone. No sympathy about you for other people's troubles—no allowances for their shortcomin's. . . . You can't even realise the fact that it would be an advantage to . . . many another bloke besides myself to wipe himself out of existence for a week or so, to be Somebody Else for the time bein' until bothers blow over and things settle down. Not you! You couldn't for nuts!"

The Reverend Aloysius flushed faintly, and opened his mouth and shut it again, looking at the wall and not at Alaric.

"If you think that the lives of the clergy are free from—ah!—anxiety, you are painfully mistaken," he said. "They are, upon the contrary, subjected to peculiar trials. As to the wish you have just expressed, I may own that while I should have conscientious scruples against shirking my responsibilities in the manner you suggest, I should be absolutely alive to the advantage of being able to do so for a period not exceeding one month."

"You mean that you actually wish you could wipe yourself out of existence for a month?" cried Alaric.

"I do mean it!" said Aloysius firmly.

"Sorry to intrude, but here's a tellygram, sir!" said Mrs. Mivitts, who had knocked until she was weary and now entered with a yellow envelope. The Reverend Aloysius opened and perused the communication with marked distaste. Then he crumpled it into a ball, hurled it into the fireplace; tucked his umbrella under his arm, seized his travelling bag, overcoat and portmantau, and bidding his twin brother a brief farewell, strode from the apartment and downstairs. The hall door opened and shut—a passing taxicab stopped in answer to a hail, then drove away with the Reverend Aloysius. . . .

"Curious beggars, parsons!" said Alaric, glancing towards the sideboard, which boasted a parched lemon and a half-emptied syphon of soda-water. He tried the cupboard, but it was sternly locked. "Inhospitable beggars, too!" he said bitterly. Then he strolled to the window, which was on the second-floor front, and glancing down into Gower Street recognized in two shabby individuals who stood leaning against the railings on the opposite side—persons whom it seemed to him that he particularly wished to avoid.

"Confound 'em!" he ejaculated. "They've winded me already. Now, if I'd had any decent luck they'd have taken old Ally for me in clerical disguise, and while they were paddlin' after his taxi, I could have got away. We can't be as alike as twins ought to be—or perhaps it's my moustache that makes the difference." He wheeled about and went to the toilet-table, and covering the hirsute ornament with his hand, gazed at himself long and earnestly. "It is the moustache!" he murmured, as his eye fell upon a patent safety razor in a case, which Aloysius had omitted to pack away or lock up. An attenuated stump of shaving soap lay near the razor. Alaric picked it up, gazed at it intently, and then a strange light shone in his eyes and the determined ex-

pression which came over his face made him very like Aloysius. "By the living Jingo, I'll do it!" he said. He went to the sideboard, filled a tumbler with soda from the syphon, dipped in the soap, improvised a lather, and . . . in another minute the handsome hairless face of the Reverend Aloysius was reflected in the toilet mirror over the fashionable collar and dandy necktie of Alaric, the Man About Town. . . .

"You thought I'd looked you up to borrow money," said Alaric, addressing the face in the glass, "but you were wrong. I'm only going to borrow your lodgings and your landlady, and your Christian name and your clerical clothes—I suppose you've left some of 'em behind you——"

He went to the wardrobe, which was firmly fastened with a cheap lock. "Blood's thicker than water," he murmured as he produced his own bunch of keys, "and you can hardly be had up for burglin' your own twin brother." He looked into the well-stocked wardrobe and smiled. "He's gone away in his oldest togs and left the swell ones behind," Alaric said contentedly. "Ally was always such a careful old chap!" And then he selected garments and made a complete change. The transformation was just complete, the giddy butterfly had been changed into a handsome young grub, and the worldly garb of Alaric Cottle had just been put away in the wardrobe, when there was a loud knock at the room door.

"Come in!" said Alaric, reluctantly quitting the looking-glass as a short little red-headed gentleman in emphatic check tweeds darted into the room.

"Mercy upon me, Cottle," cried the red-headed gentleman, falling upon Alaric and shaking him violently by both hands, "how fortunate that I insisted upon coming upstairs! They said you had gone away in a taxi; I insisted that you wouldn't dream of going without leaving

a letter for me—and instead of finding the letter, I find yourself! My dear friend——!”

“We are evidently old pals,” thought Alaric. “I’d better shake hands again!” and he did.

“You guess why I’m here?” said the little gentleman, blowing his nose. “My dear Cottle, the Rector has relapsed again, and no one but yourself can help us in the emergency. I received a cable from Monte Carlo yesterday to say that it is imperative that his cure should be prolonged for another three weeks, or a month and urgently asking for funds. His system is weaker than we feared, Cottle, considerably weaker!”

“Systems are all my eye at roulette,” said Alaric, “and if he’s been puntin’ on principle no wonder if he’s cleaned out.” He stopped because the red-headed little gentleman was looking rather puzzled. Then he said affably, “But you haven’t told me yet what I can do for you, you know.”

“Come back and reassume the duty, Cottle,” said the little gentleman, clasping his hands upon the top of his umbrella. “No more unpleasant things will be said about the intoning, and if Bulpit brings up the question of the flower-vases and banners at any future Vestry-meeting, he shall be pulverised. And—you grumbled at two guineas a week because of the size of the parish. I have consulted Mrs. Mantowler and Squire Halkett, and we are prepared to make it three. So come back to duty, Cottle, and Mangold Wurzelfield will welcome you—my word and hand upon it!”

Alaric smiled rather foolishly.

“I know why you hesitate, Cottle,” resumed the excitable little gentleman. “But Mrs. Mantowler has been very different since you left, quite manageable—in fact. Before, I grant you, she was a Dragoness! And I know her interference was a thorn in your side. But she has left off interfering—you could hardly get her to meddle

now if you tried, she was so tamed by your spirited action in throwing up the duty last week and going back to London when she introduced the Swedish Musical Dumb-bell Exercises into the Sunday School routine."

"Was that why we quarrelled?" asked Alaric.

"I told her I knew you would have forgotten all about it, but she didn't seem so sure," said the little gentleman, nodding. "However, she owed to me when she saw me off at the Junction this morning that she'd sent you a telegram of apology. She's a highly educated woman and knows how to do the proper thing in the proper way; it's bound to be something gratifying and soothing. Haven't you had it?"

"I don't seem to remember——" stammered Alaric.

"You're always absent-minded on Fridays," said his visitor admiringly. "That's what started the story about your fasting. And Louisa Brigg, who used to do your washing, made things worse by pretending that you wore hair undershirts. But Mrs. Mantowler set that right. She said they were only Jaegers. Isn't that a crumpled telegram lying in the fireplace?"

Red Head darted at it, but Alaric, in whom the quality of caution was not wanting, got it before him. He unrolled the crumpled parallelogram of pink paper and glanced at it. The message ran thus:

"Come back or will tear the mask from your false face and all shall know you for a villain.—LAVINIA."

"This is hardly gratifyin' or even soothin'," thought Alaric. "Perhaps it's from another friend—not Mrs. What's-her-name?"

"You wouldn't care to let me see that wire?" insinuated the little red-headed man.

"I don't think I should, quite," replied Alaric cautiously.

"Not in Mrs. Mantowler's own interests?—to prove to the Vestry, should the question be mooted hereafter, that she had done the proper thing?"

Alaric shook his head.

"Or, leaving me out of consideration as a Parish Trustee and Vestryman and looking at me merely as Peter Turbeyson, her husband's cousin and her own co-lega-tee," hinted the visitor, "wouldn't you think it proper to——?"

Alaric intimated that he wouldn't.

"Then give me your hand and pack your portmanteau and come back with me by the next train to Mangold Wurzelfield," exclaimed Mr. Peter Turbeyson with apparent heartiness. "We're all ready to welcome you, if we are a 'pack of riotous fox-hunters.'"

"Are you though?" exclaimed Alaric.

"You called us so yourself,—or somebody said you did," said Mr. Peter Turbeyson. "But we overlook it on account of your not being a man to ride yourself."

"But I am," said Alaric.

Mr. Peter Turbeyson's eyes became circular in shape.

"Eh?"

"I am not a man to ride myself," said Alaric, "because I never tried. But I am a man to ride a horse—and pretty straight too, I can tell you!"

"Why, bless my soul, Cottle!" cried the bewildered Mr. Turbeyson, "we all thought hunting was dead against your principles."

"Did you ever offer me a mount, old chap?" said Alaric, clapping the parish magnate familiarly on the back.

"No," replied Mr. Turbeyson shortly, "I can't say I ever did!"

"You shall," said Alaric, "before we are a week older!"

"He's changed his tactics," reflected Mr. Peter Turbey-

son, glancing out of the corners of his little pink eyes at the young clergyman. "Going to play the tolerant game, hang him!" But he said aloud, genially:

"I'll be off now, and leave you to your packing. Meet me at Victoria seven o'clock sharp, and I'll take you down by the Sussex Express." He turned on his heel as he got to the door, and said in rather a marked way: "Geraldine will be glad to welcome you again. I think she realises that she acted hastily, and will soon discover that she has misjudged you."

"I'm sure I hope she will!" said Alaric warmly. When the door closed behind Mr. Turbeyson he added as he drew the crumpled telegram from his pocket and again perused its contents: "I wonder which I shall like best, being welcomed by Geraldine or unmasked by Lavinia? Upon my soul, my reverend brother has been goin' it strong down at Mangold Wurzelfield! No wonder he talked about the life of a clergyman bein' full of peculiar trials!"

And with a running commentary of conjectures which would have caused the blood of the Reverend Aloysius to creep, Alaric rummaged out a kit-bag from under the bed and stowed into it such articles of underclothing as he thought he should require. "I shall telegraph to my landlady at Tuke Street," he reflected, "and tell her to send a bag of socks and underwear to care of the Reverend Aloysius Cottle at Mangold Wurzelfield. For whether Lavinia is right about the Jaegers or not,—and I wonder how she got her information?—I'm hanged if I'm going to wear 'em!" said Alaric.

II

Thursday had come round, and in the neat, lavender-smelling, chintzy parlour of the Rectory at Mangold Wurzelfield, Alaric was sitting at breakfast. A small but

noisy church bell was clanging away persistently close by.

"Dash that bell!" said Alaric, chipping his third egg, "it gets on my nerves!" He glanced up and encountered the blank stare of the curate, Mr. Choom, who had called in upon business connected with the parish.

"It's tolling for old Mrs. Tradgett," said Mr. Choom, withdrawing his large watery eyes from Alaric's with obvious difficulty. "You bury her this morning, you know!"

"Do I?" Alaric's face fell, and he pushed away the unfinished egg and drank his coffee hastily. "Do you know, Choom, old chap," he said after a pause, "that you would oblige me very much by doin' it instead. If it came to pinch, I dare say I could bury a live person, but buryin' a dead one is beyond me."

"I could perform the duty if you would undertake the house-visiting in my place," said Mr. Choom after reflection. "There are three bedridden old women at Acre Lane to be read to, and the members of the Coal and Blanket Club have a general meeting at the Recreation Room on the Goose Green."

"I'll see you!" said Alaric absently, "I mean . . . I take the old women and the blankets." He drew out his cigar-case as he spoke and selected a choice cheroot.

"Dear me! you have changed your views with regard to smoking!" said Mr. Choom with mild surprise. "I always understood that you abhorred the weed."

"I may abhor the weed," said Alaric, lighting one, "but I should be shirkin' my duty if I hesitated to—to smoke at the instance of my—medical man."

"Oh! I see!" said the enlightened Choom. "It's necessary for your throat, he thinks, and so you do it?"

"And so I do it!" echoed Alaric absently. "By the way, have you noticed a lady who sits in the front pew on the left side of the chancel, under a marble effigy with

a ruff and a broken nose? At least she sat there at Evening Service yesterday. She is dark, and rather crummy—I mean the lady, not the effigy, and she wears plenty of colours and looks determined. Who is she?"

"Why . . . don't you know Mrs. Mantowler?" Choom asked in low and broken tones, "or—are you joking?"

"Of course I know Mrs. Mantowler," said Alaric composedly, "and of course I was jokin'. . . . Don't you know me by this time?"

He slapped Mr. Choom gaily on the back and the curate reddened to the ears.

"I certainly *thought* I knew you, Mr. Cottle!" he said, with marked stress upon the third word. "But since—since your arrival upon the afternoon of Monday last, I will candidly confess—I have been mistaken."

Alaric, who was pouring a liqueur of brandy out of a silver pocket flask into a clean egg-cup, turned round sharply.

"Why mistaken?" he demanded.

"If I must speak out I must!" said Choom, with beads of perspiration breaking out all over his knobby forehead. "You weren't like yourself on Wednesday evening—you behaved as queerly as could be—and the whole parish is agog about it."

"Let the parish mind its own business," said Alaric defiantly.

"That's just what the parish is doing," said Mr. Choom, plucking up. "There's Mrs. Tradgett's bell stopping at the ninety-third stroke. I must go and get my surplice on."

"Let Mrs. Tradgett keep a little," said Alaric, getting between Mr. Choom and the door. "If she's waited ninety-three years to be buried, a few minutes won't make any difference to her. I want to hear about Wednesday evening."

"Well, for one thing, you bungled the Ritual dreadfully," said Mr. Choom.

"I'm down on Ritualism," said Alaric promptly, "like nails!"

"Why, you're an advanced High Churchman," cried the astonished Choom, "or you've——"

"Say I pretended to be," said Alaric, winking, "and perhaps you'll be right."

"When you read the Lessons you didn't know when to leave off," said the curate. "We should have been listening, and you would have been reading now—if I hadn't led you by force from the lectern."

"That's zeal," said Alaric, "and ought to be called by its proper name. What else?"

"Well, you didn't begin to do things when you ought to have done them, and when I went to do them for you you started in and mixed everything up," continued the curate, wiping his streaming brow: "and you read the Responses right through—never gave the congregation the ghost of a chance. . . ."

"And?" interrogated Alaric freezingly.

"And," continued Mr. Choom, warming with his recollections, "you gave the Epistle for the second Sunday after Doncaster, and I must say, Mr. Cottle——"

"Absence of mind," said Alaric. "Pure absence of mind!"

"Even though the announcement was made unintentionally, sir," said Mr. Choom weightily, "the effect upon the congregation was none the less bad."

"They laughed," said Alaric doubtfully, feeling for a moustache that was not there.

"They did laugh, sir," said Mr. Choom bluntly. "The hilarity was not subdued when I ascended the pulpit. It broke out at intervals irrepressibly throughout my sermon."

"Well, if they could find anything to laugh at in that,

old chap," said Alaric, smothering a yawn, "they're easily amused."

He let Mr. Choom escape and strolled out into the Rectory garden. "Choom shall coach me all the week," he said to himself with determination. "There shall be no bungling next Sunday, if I work him off his feet. It'll be my turn to preach then. I wonder if I've got the pluck to do it, or if I'd better have a cold? Hi! you there!"

He addressed an ancient man in moleskins who was digging dandelions out of the lawn with a dibble, and the ancient man came shambling towards him, fingering the remnant of a hat.

"I suppose you are the gardner, old chappie," said Alaric, "and know all about everybody in the neighbourhood. If you can tell me who was pitchin' gravel up at my bedroom window last night between eleven-thirty and twelve, I'll be obliged to you!"

The ancient man rasped his thumb upon his stubbly chin.

"Maybe 'tw'er a sick call," he said slowly, "or maybe 'tw'er a ghost."

"Ghost be smothered," said Alaric impatiently. "How could a ghost chuck gravel?" His eyes were attracted to the neatly-clipped garden hedge, above the top of which swiftly glided a charming female head, surmounted by a coquettish hat and apparently unattached to a body. "If that's a ghost," said Alaric, recovering his temper, as the head bowed and smiled, "it's the kind I don't object to. Who is the young lady?"

"Ey?" said the ancient man, opening his rheumy eyes.

"I asked the name of that young lady!" explained Alaric.

"You be a-jokin'!" said the gardener with a cavernous grin. Then he raised a horny hand and pointed to the garden-gate. "Miss Geraldine be a-comin' in!" he said simply.

"So this is Geraldine," reflected Alaric, as the owner of the charming head that had bowed to him, easily wheeling her bicycle, walked towards him up the short gravel drive. "Perhaps she has come to own that she misjudged me." And he hastened to meet her, wearing his brightest smile.

Miss Geraldine smiled brightly, holding out her hand. "So you have come back to us after all!" she said in a pleasant voice, "though you said you never would." Her manner was tinged with coquetry.

"When a man has been cruelly misjudged by a woman whom he warmly admires," said the ingenious Alaric, diving at his opportunity, "he's apt to form rash determinations. I reconsidered mine in cooler blood, and as you say, I have come back to you—after all!"

"I should have said—back to Mangold Wurzelfeld," explained Miss Geraldine, frowning slightly.

"Ah, but you said the other thing first," said Alaric, throwing into his smile all the fascination of which he was capable.

"How wonderfully changed he is!" thought Miss Geraldine. "Well," she said aloud, "I must be going back to give uncle his lunch. Come to tea at four, if you can spare the time from your parish duties." As Alaric eagerly accepted his fair visitor's invitation, the even beat of a pony's trot broke upon their ears, and a smart dog-cart drawn, by a neat cob and driven by a lady, passed along the road beyond the garden-hedge and vanished in a light puff of dust.

Alaric recognised in the driver of the dog-cart the lady who had occupied the front pew on the left-hand side of the chancel, but the lady, who was a stout, handsome brunette of forty, did not appear to recognise Alaric. Her eyes, which were large and black, dealt him a passing glance of stony indifference. Perhaps her lips tightened as her regard included Mr. Cottle's companion, but her bright complexion underwent no change.

"Oh!" ejaculated Miss Geraldine. She stamped her small, neatly shod foot upon the close-cut turf and flushed with indignation. "Did you see that? Why, she cut us both—*dead!*" Her eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered. "Forgive me, Mr. Cottle!" she said. "I seem fated to do foolish, ill-considered things. Perhaps it is because I never knew a mother—because my stepmother and my uncle have been too indulgent. . . . I realise now that I ought not to have stopped as I cycled past, and that my having been detected in conversation with you will give rise to fresh annoyance. . . ." Her clear eyes overflowed, she searched for her handkerchief. Before Alaric knew what he was doing, he had taken the foolish little square of cambric out of her hand, and wiped away the shining drops that chased each other down the charming cheeks of the young girl.

"Don't cry," he said bravely. "I would bear more than that—willingly—for you."

"But you ought not to say so," said Miss Geraldine warmly. "She is my friend—at least she was until a few weeks ago, and I would not grieve or wound her for the *world!* You believe me, don't you?"

"Indeed I do!" said Alaric warmly. "And would you mind tellin' me who you mean by 'she'?"

"Are you joking?" cried Geraldine, opening her blue eyes widely. "Why, who should I mean but Lavinia Mantowler?"

"Was *that* Lavinia?" exclaimed Alaric.

"How can you make a jest of her?" said Geraldine, "after all that has passed? You, who owned just now that you warmly admired her, and that to be misjudged by her was enough to drive you to a rash determination!" Her eyes shot blue fire.

Alaric drew himself to his full height. "Pardon me," he said coldly, "it is you who are jesting. The woman who misjudged me and whose undeserved scorn drove

the"—he hesitated—"the iron into my soul, was Geraldine. Geraldine, who afterwards realised that she acted hastily and who—let her deny it if she will——"

"Stop!" cried Geraldine, as Alaric was pounding on. "Be generous, Mr. Cottle! Say no more!"

She was in earnest, for her cheeks were pale and her hand trembled so that Alaric took it in his own.

"All right, I'll hold my tongue!" he said heroically.

"I too will try to be generous," said Geraldine. "I will try to think that when you allowed yourself to be so far carried away by the impulse of the moment—I refer for the first and last time to the Eve of the Harvest Festival when we were garlanding the pulpit with tomatoes and hop-vine—as to tell me that you loved me, you were not so base as to triumph over the admission you wrung from my lips. I will believe that in momentary delirium, you were forgetful of the sacred pledge that you had given to Lavinia Mantowler."

"Pledge!" shouted Alaric. "Why, I never spo—I never pledged anything to her in my life. We're absolute strangers—I mean—to anything—of the kind *you* mean!"

Geraldine gazed at him in amazement. "Then *she* told me what was not true! Oh! if I could believe that!" she said under her breath.

"You may believe it!" said Alaric hotly.

"You say it as a clergyman?" breathed Geraldine.

"I say it as the whole Bench of Bishops," he retorted, "if you like!"

"Then," said Geraldine, studying her machine and placing one foot upon the pedal, as a rainbow of a smile shone through the tear drops that yet gemmed her lashes, "I can speak frankly. You may despise me for it, but . . ."

"But?"

"Please let go the handle-bar," said Geraldine. Then as Alaric obeyed she continued: "You were not the only

one to blame . . . on the Eve of the Harvest Festival. When you . . . kissed me in the pulpit. . . ."

"Did I?" said Alaric eagerly. "I should say . . . I know it was wrong, but—"

"—*I meant you to*," said Geraldine softly, and shot away like an arrow.

"I'm glad of that," said Alaric, as the machine with its fair rider sped down the road. "No, I'm dashed if I am!" he continued after a moment's reflection. "To throw herself at the head of a muff like old Ally is simple coquetry. Still, I can't believe a girl like that would go so far as to throw gravel at windows!"

He set out, fortified by no previous knowledge of the locality, upon his consoling errand to the bedridden old women of Acre Lane, which proved to be a damp double-row of miserable cottages with a muddy ditch between them. Alaric had forgotten to provide himself with religious literature, but none of the old women appeared to mind. He left behind him at each cottage instead of holy precepts, a thin deposit of silver, and more than one old woman to whom he had promised a bottle of real whisky to rub on her joints, vociferously called down blessings on his head.

He encountered a few people as he returned from his errand of mercy, having forgotten all about the meeting of the Coal and Blanket Club,—and these persons saluted him with a mingling of cordiality and reserve.

"They're thinkin' about Wednesday evenin'," said Alaric to himself, and so they were. But under the spell of the young clergyman's cheerfulness doubts were forgotten; and Mrs. Bindle of the Manor Farm and Colonel Crotch of The Hawbitts shook hands and departed upon their respective ways, feeling warmly prepossessed in favour of Mr. Cottle.

"Only wanted knowing!" the Colonel said, as he whistled to his dogs, and resumed his constitutional.

"And here have I been for weeks on end, shunning, positively shunning the sight of that young fellow! 'A canting Ritualist' I called him. Well, if all Ritualists know as much about mange in setters as that chap . . . or tell"—he chuckled hoarsely—"a good story with as much point, I shall be glad to see 'em down here, that's all!"

"Who'd have dreamed, Mar, of you asking Mr. Cottle to tea!" giggled Miss Bindle, as her mother clicked to the broken-kneed old pony that drew the Manor Farm governess-cart, and Alaric's parting smile left reflected radiance in the puddles. "After all the things you've called him, too!"

"I was hasty, Maria, and I own it," said Mrs. Bindle. "Though when I met him first, he looked as glum as yellow soap and held his nose in the air over my head as though he couldn't afford to breathe on the same level. But since he's come back he's as affable and polite as if he'd been away to be inoculated for civility. And remind me to make a whipped-cream for Saturday, and get out the best quince-marmalade."

"Hang it all!" ejaculated Alaric, stopping in the middle of the road as Mrs. Bindle uttered these hospitable directions, "it's close on four o'clock, and Geraldine asked me to tea. What a duffin' silly thing of me not to have asked her what her surname was and where she lived? The thought did occur, but I shied at doin' it. And now . . . Hallo!"

He jumped out of the way as a vehicle rattled round the corner of the muddy green lane in which he stood. The cob shied, the charioteer (a lady) pulled up smartly, and Alaric found himself face to face with the handsome Mrs. Mantowler. She bent her dark eyes full upon Alaric's with a look of fiery indignation, and Alaric, not knowing what else to do, took off his hat with his best manner.

Mrs. Mantowler spoke, after a strong, emotional pause. "Man!" she uttered in deep accents, "do you know that you have made me hate you?"

"Don't say that!" said Alaric coaxingly.

"I told you in my telegram," said Mrs. Mantowler, "that if you did not return you would be a villain!"

"So you did!" said Alaric, thinking that the mild name of "Lavinia" was singularly unsuited to the stormy lady who bore it.

"Now that you have returned, it is to play the part of a traitor!" said Mrs. Mantowler, nervously gripping her driving-whip. "Did not I see you with Geraldine this morning?"

"I must soften her down somehow," thought Alaric. Aloud he said, in a tone of entreaty: "Lavinia! why can't you be just to me?"

Mrs. Mantowler burst into a mocking laugh. "If I treated you with justice I should lash you from here to the village," she said, a dangerous light in her black eyes. "Tell Geraldine Halkett so from me!"

"I would—if I knew where she lived," said Alaric bluntly. Mrs. Mantowler stared at him fiercely.

"What do you mean? Do you not constantly visit at Wychwood?"

"Never been into the house in my life!" said Alaric with truth, making a mental note of the address.

"I would give worlds to believe you!" said Mrs. Mantowler, almost in Geraldine's own words. "But at any rate you will not deny that you are intimate. You will not pretend that on the Eve of the Harvest Festival——"

"Ah, you're thinking of the kissing in the pulpit," said Alaric unguardedly.

"You would deny *that*, I suppose, if I had not myself witnessed the outrage!" sneered the angry lady.

"Outrage! I like that!" said Alaric. "Why, she *meant* me to! She said so!"

"The barefaced flirt!" cried Mrs. Mantowler.

"And whether a man is a parson or isn't a parson, when a pretty girl gives him a lead, he is bound to follow!" continued Alaric.

"Men are weak creatures!" said Mrs. Mantowler gloomily. "Aloysius!" Alaric jumped at the name. "Perhaps I have been hard on you—unjust to you——"

"Well, takin' things all the way round, perhaps you have!" returned Alaric, feeling again for the moustache that was not there.

"At any rate, Geraldine shall never enter my doors again!" said Mrs. Mantowler firmly.

"I wonder where your doors are?" thought Alaric. But he pulled out his watch and said:

"It's close on four. Can you tell me a short cut to Wychwood?"

"Ah! that is how you are going to revenge yourself!" cried Mrs. Mantowler, bristling. She pointed with a trembling whip across a stile on the left of the road, indicating a field-path leading to a plantation-gate, beyond which, amidst autumnal-tinted trees, rose the white chimneys of a comfortable-looking country-house. "Go to her! You have my full permission!" said the lady with a sarcastic smile.

"Many thanks!" said Alaric, smiling and bowing. Then he leaped the stile. The sound of a sob caught his ear and he glanced back in mid-air to see Mrs. Mantowler, her face hidden in her hands, crying heartily.

"Upset, poor thing!" he thought, and had the impulse to go back and comfort her, but it struck him that Geraldine's tea must be getting cold, and he strode hurriedly away in the direction of the white chimneys.

"Oh, why was I born to be the victim of this man's fatal charm!" moaned the weeping Mrs. Mantowler as she dried her eyes. "I thought him my vassal—my trembling serf. I meant to humble, crush—quell him!

and what is the result? He deserts me,—insults and defies me; and—why I cannot tell!—I love him all the better for it!”

She recovered and whipped up the cob as Geraldine put sugar and cream in Alaric's cup. He spent a very pleasant hour or two at Wychwood, and returned to the Rectory to dinner, only to be disturbed at the outset of the meal by a visitor in the person of the late Mrs. Tradgett's grandson, a sleek-headed farmer, desirous of obtaining a reduction in the customary burial fee on the ground that his deceased grandmother had been interred in a damp corner of the churchyard.

“Thankee kindly, sir!” said the bereaved relative heartily, as he received back the disputed half-crown out of the little pile of moist silver he had placed in Alaric's unwilling hand. “You be a gen'l'man, you be, an' for arl folks say, I wish there were more like ye!”

“You're very kind,” said Alaric. “Would you mind tellin' me what folks say?” he added curiously.

“They say as ye be cracky i' th' top-storey since ye came back from Lunnon!” said Mr. Tradgett, wiping the inside of his crape-banded white hat with a red cotton handkerchief, “an' drat me if I don't think there mun be some truth in th' tale since ye giv' me back that half-crownd.” He put away his receipt in the lining of the white hat before putting it on and continued: “Parsons—i' their wits—bain't so ready to leggo o' money they've once got their clawses on. Goo'-night, sir!” He lumbered out.

“This is gratitude in the Rural Districts!” said Alaric, as he went back to his cooling dinner.

He sighed, because the fowl, with its homely but savoury accompaniments, had been temptingly hot when Mr. Tradgett was announced. Hannah, the serving-maid, who was both pretty and kind-hearted, was touched by the obvious depression of her young pastor. “You mus'n't

mind him, please, sir!" she said. "A meaner scrimp than that Joe Tradgett never drewed breath, an' as for gratitude, if you was to kill 'n wi' kindness he'd never thank ye! An' I can hot up the pullet in a minute if you'll wait!"

"You're a very considerate little girl," said Alaric, smiling into Hannah's eyes as she leant over to take the dish. In helping her to raise it from the table he mixed up his hands with Hannah's, and in the midst of the slight confusion that ensued a distinct rap sounded upon the glass of the French window, which was so thickly screened with Virginia creeper that the blind was seldom drawn.

"Oh, mussy!" cried Hannah, turning from crimson to pink—her way of becoming pale.

"What the mischief was that? Did you see anything?" asked Alaric.

"No, please, sir!" shuddered Hannah. "But oh! I think it was the ghost that rattles and scrapes o' nights!"

"And throws gravel, do you mean?" said Alaric incautiously.

"Cook and me heard it again last night!" quavered Hannah. "Since you went away to Lunnon us hadn't—but now you've come back it's begunned again. And oh! I'm afraid o' the passages when my blood runs cold like this!"

Alaric encouraged the frightened girl as best he could, begged her not to dilute the gravy by crying into it, and at last escorted her as far as the kitchen, carrying the dish himself. But Hannah's alarm had infected the cook, for the fowl came back in an unsatisfactory condition and the bread-and-butter pudding which followed was calcined to uneatableness. Perhaps because of the unsatisfactory nature of his meal, perhaps owing to the disturbed condition of his mind, Alaric, when he at length retired to rest, wooed slumber in vain. He tossed and turned upon his bed for an hour, and then, opening his eyes sudden-

ly, sat up. There was no mistake about the sharp crackling sound. A shower of gravel had been thrown at his window. He slipped out of bed and into his dressing-gown, and stealing noiselessly across the room, lifted the sash, received a second volley full in his face.

"For shame!" came from below in a deep resonant whisper, as the young clergyman spluttered forth an expression but little in keeping with his reverend calling. "How can you disgrace your cloth by such expressions?"

"I haven't got my cloth on!" said Alaric wrathfully, "and if you want a man to keep his temper, you shouldn't chuck pebbles down his throat, whoever you are!" He cleared his eyes of grit, and looked down into the garden. the moon was concealed by clouds, but he made out a dark figure standing by a bush immediately beneath the window.

"Why have you come here and what do you want?" he asked.

"Speak lower," said the mysterious visitant, "unless you want to rouse the servants, and as quickly as you can come down and unbolt the little side-door."

"Who are you? and why *am* I to undo the little side-door?" asked Alaric.

"Do you wish to madden me to frenzy?" said the unknown. "Do you dare to deny my right to be admitted to the house you occupy when I choose to exert that right? I do not ask—I *command* you to come down and unbolt the little side-door!"

The imperious tone reminded Alaric of Mrs. Mantowler. He had not the least doubt that she and this mysterious stranger were one. He leaned out into the chilly darkness and said soothingly:

"My dear lady, do go home!"

The adjuration had not the pacifying effect Alaric had intended. His visitor uttered a kind of indignant snort and said:

"This has decided me. I came to-night to give you a last chance to explain yourself and arrest the inevitable exposure. But now—as I stand here I declare I will be pitiless. To-morrow——"

"—You will tear the mask from my false face and the world shall know me for a villain," said Alaric. "But the world—or as much of it as you can conveniently reach—is in bed and asleep just now—and I have had rather a fatiguing day, and should like to follow other people's example, if you don't mind——?"

"Ah, you think to brave me!" said Mrs. Mantowler, "and Geraldine is in the plot—or else you have deceived her. But I will let her know that my self-respect is more to me than money. Let her take it—let her take it all! But you she cannot take with it—for you are mine! Mine!—and the struggle between us will be to the death! Now go to bed, and sleep—if you can. Good-night!"

She turned to go.

"Night-night!" said Alaric. "Oh! Lavinia!"

"Yes!" she said shortly and sternly, halting in her stride.

"I suppose it was you who did the gravel-throwing last night, eh?" hinted Alaric.

"I will admit it," said Mrs. Mantowler. "I came, thinking to find you humbled and repentant—I did not dream that you were capable of the brazen effrontery—the revolting hypocrisy which I now know you can command at will. But though you triumph to-night, be sure of this—you will not triumph to-morrow!"

She was gone, with the Delphic utterance. As Alaric turned to grope back through the darkness to his couch, he found that he had forgotten where it was. Finally, after stumbling in rapid succession over a fender and a chair; after having been brought up sharp by the corner of a chest of drawers,—after having firmly wedged the burner of a gas-bracket into the socket of his left eye and

stepped into the bath of cold water that stood ready for the morning, Alaric found a match and struck it, and the bed at the same moment. The light showed him a photograph of the Reverend Aloysius hanging on the opposite wall. He had never entertained a particularly high opinion of his brother, but he was sensible that Aloysius had risen several degrees in his estimation.

"Two women—both attractive—one charmin'!" he murmured, "pullin' caps over him. And one calls in the mornin' and one wakes him out of his beauty-sleep by throwing gravel and demanding explanations. Upon my word, Ally, for a parson you have been goin' it, my boy! And Hannah seemed quite used to being protected from ghosts in the passage." He pursued his train of musings, until the hot end of the match falling upon his bare instep, banished these reflections, and with another lay expletive Alaric bounced into bed. At breakfast next morning he had a visitor.

"Mr. Turbeyson," Hannah announced, and the red-headed little man bustled in.

"Don't apologise, Cottle!" He took Alaric's chair and swept Alaric's coffee-cup and plate of fried kidneys and ham away to make room on the table for his elbows.

"I don't," said Alaric. "I'm waitin' for you,"

"Why—I have your seat, haven't I?" said Mr. Turbeyson.

"Not now!" said Alaric cheerfully, lifting Mr. Turbeyson out of it and assuming it and resuming his interrupted meal with placid cheerfulness.

"The fact is, Cottle," said Mr. Turbeyson, "the secret is out. Lavinia Mantowler has been to my place this morning." He waited to mark the effect of the announcement. "And she had told me all!" His red hair stood on end as he rubbed it up in his excitement, and his little pink eyes twinkled eagerly. "She has been rash—from a worldly point of view—and from an unworldly point

you have been disinterested in doing what you have done. I sincerely hope you may neither of you live to regret it. But whether you do or not, the bulk of the money goes to Mantowler's step-sister. I think that's plain enough."

"Quite!" said Alaric, taking more toast.

"Lavinia Mantowler will have about seven hundred a year," said Mr. Turbeyson. "As her late husband's agent and executor I speak with certainty. Seven hundred a year, with economy, ought to be enough for both of you!"

"My good sir," said Alaric, "I don't want any of it. Let Mrs. Mantowler keep her income—for me! My simple wants are easily satisfied." He took another kidney. "She will go her way and I shall go mine. She will do as she likes and I shall do as I like. Perfect freedom on either side!" He drank his coffee defiantly.

"Cottle! Cottle!" said Mr. Turbeyson in horror. "Your cloth, man! your cloth!"

"I have had my cloth stuffed down my throat," said Alaric peevishly, "until I feel like a boa-constrictor who has swallowed his blanket. As for Mrs. Mantowler, I will admit that she is a fine woman—even a takin' woman. But all this dagger-and-bowl business tries a man. And this I say and this I stick to—her jealousy of Miss Geraldine is unladylike and unwomanly."

"You must own, Cottle, that you have given her the excuse to be jealous," said Mr. Turbeyson.

"Never, I'll swear!" affirmed Alaric.

"Do you deny that any tie exists between you?" cried Mr. Turbeyson, jumping up.

"I do," said Alaric. His head was dizzy, he yielded in a kind of delirium to the tide of circumstances that swept him along. "If she asserts it let her prove it!" he added defiantly.

"I will see her at once—must get to the bottom of this.

But if she cannot prove what she asserts the money is hers—inalienably hers," shouted Turbeyson, thumping the table.

"Damn the money!" exploded Alaric, hitting it too.

"Cottle, I overlook this," said Mr. Turbeyson, rising, "as in your present state of excitement I do not hold you responsible for your words. But if it occurs again, it will be my painful duty to report you to the Vestry, which will communicate with the Rural Dean, who will take his own measures with regard to laying the case before the Bishop of Wimsterford. Good-morning!"

He left very quickly, in order to avoid hearing the ultimate destination to which the frenzied Alaric consigned both the Bishop and the Rural Dean.

"Cottle denies the bond—and as calm and cool as you please!" Mr. Turbeyson muttered to himself as he strode down the short gravel drive. "On the other hand, Lavinia affirms it. It's not natural, seeming anxious to part with two thousand a year and Hilcot Manorlees in favour of the girl, and I'm beginning to think it's a trap." He blinked his pink eyes rapidly. "Odd if I'd baited one for Cottle to fall into it myself! I'd an idea that Mrs. Mantowler's enmity towards him arose from jealousy of his even temporarily occupying the Rector's place,—and I more than suspect there was something between him and Geraldine. But I've been going too quick. I must keep quiet—be vigilant and keep quiet,—if ever I am to benefit by Mantowler's hatred of parsons!" So instead of going straight back to Mrs. Mantowler Mr. Turbeyson went home and spent the day over his farm accounts—for he was a sharp and money-making land-cultivator.

Thenceforward the days passed peacefully for Alaric. By dint of straining to the utmost his native ingenuity he managed to avoid not only burying his parishioners, but baptising them and marrying them, and thanks to the assiduous coaching of Mr. Choom the Sunday service

—which was attended by many persons to whom church-going was the exception rather than the rule—was not stirred by any peculiar element of strangeness. Yet, as Alaric preached, embroidering upon a well-worn temperance sermon of the Reverend Aloysius's arabesques born of his own imagination and experience—nobody went away without something to talk about.

"You certainly possess a great knowledge of human nature—of a certain kind," said the bewildered Mr. Choom afterwards; "but is it necessary to the success of this new scheme of yours that you should"—he coughed—"employ slang in the pulpit?"

"Did I?" said Alaric, opening his eyes.

"You said—and I don't deny the expression was nervous: 'The man who ignores good breeding is a bounder, the man who ignores decency is a sweep; the man who ignores religion is not only a bounder *and* a sweep, but a cad into the bargain!' And then you said, alluding to the liquor-habit, 'Constant pegging ends in unlimited booze, and unlimited booze, my brethren, ends in D.T.' And—speaking of the only *really* good man you personally had even known, you added, 'You will be sorry to hear that he is now in Heaven!' And I don't venture to say the line you're taking is an ill-advised one, but I am sure that it will scandalise a great many persons."

"Will they stay away from church in consequence, or will they come to be scandalised again?" asked Alaric acutely.

"They'll come again!" said Mr. Choom with conviction.

"Trust them for that!"

"Then what have you got to complain of?" asked Alaric.

He was in good spirits. The country diet, constant exercise and regular hours had given tone to his system and renewed vigour to his muscles. The absence of

dunning letters and County Court summonses had relieved his mind and cheered his spirits. And added to this, he was in love, and with a charming girl, who made no pretence of regarding his sentiments with indifference. He knew that the jealous Mrs. Mantowler regarded his constant meetings with Geraldine as so many repeated insults to herself, and that she would carry out her threat of one day unmasking him, and sometimes he could hardly contain his curiosity to learn the real nature of the wrong she had sustained.

And he urged on his suit with Geraldine. He was very much in love—Miss Halkett was no longer a minor, and in the same condition; and when Alaric boldly proposed to seal the compact between them by a visit to the office of the District Registrar, she was not as much shocked as he had expected.

"Even if I consented—which I don't dream of doing," she said, "it seems wrong for a clergyman to be civilly married."

"We'll be uncivilly married afterwards," said Alaric, "and if you insist on a Bishop and sixteen bridesmaids—you shall have 'em. Only let me make sure of you—let me be certain that nobody can part us, Jerry, dear, before we let people into our secret."

"You are afraid of Lavinia, I believe," said Geraldine, scanning her lover's countenance.

"She has threatened to part us, and I have no doubt she'll try to keep her word!" said Alaric ruefully.

"And if I consent to this—dreadfully informal course of action," said Geraldine, "are you sure that you will never repent marrying a comparatively poor young woman?"

"Sure!" said Alaric, who, to do him justice, had been too much engaged by Geraldine's person to think much about her purse.

"My step-brother was a strange man," said Geraldine pensively, "Scarcely sane on certain points, I fancy. And, by the conditions his will imposes on me, I forfeit the greater part of my income by marrying you."

"But your step-brother didn't know me!" objected Alaric.

"If my step-brother had," said Geraldine fondly, "I believe he would have made a different will."

"By the way, who was he when he was alive?" asked Alaric. Geraldine opened her lovely eyes.

"*Who was he?*" Lavinia's late husband Harrison Mantowler, of course. How can you ask when you know quite well?"

Alaric repressed the impulse to ask many more questions, but with an inward conviction that his stay in Mangold Wurzelfield would be of short duration, he hastened his preparations for the wedding before the District Registrar. It took place on the morning of the County Harriers' Ball, which was annually celebrated in the Masonic Hall given to Mangold Wurzelfield by a local magnate and generally pointed out to strangers by residents as being, next to the Church, the Recreation Hall, and the Salvation Army Barracks, the chief architectural feature of the village.

The Registrar's office was a mile out of Mangold Wurzelfield, and the Registrar, Alaric ascertained when he went to give the customary notice, was away in London. His representative, a pimply elderly man, carried out the duties of his office without enthusiasm, in the presence of Geraldine's maid and a comparatively respectable tramp whom Alaric had impressed from the highway—and then the newly-married couple parted and went home to breakfast.

"You have given up a lot for me, Jerry, my darling!" said the bridegroom repentantly. "I hope you may never regret it!"

"As if I could! I shall think of you at the Ball to-night, dearest!" said Mrs. Cottle fondly, as Alaric kissed her.

"You will not only think of me but see me!" said Alaric, "because I have had an invitation and shall certainly be there!"

"But I thought you absolutely disapproved of dancing clergymen!" said Geraldine in surprise.

"That was a long while ago," said Alaric, "and as you have often remarked, I am changed. I am not what I was when I knew you first, Geraldine."

"It is the change in you that made me love you!" said Geraldine.

"If that fellow De Braybroke hasn't dropped my last dollars over his System, instead of breakin' the banks wherever he goes," thought Alaric as he kissed his newly-made bride and hurried back to the Rectory, "there won't be change enough to buy sugar for the bird. Jerry tells me she'll have a few hundreds a year left when the bulk is scooped by Mantowler's executors. That must be secured to her absolutely, bless her! And when I chuck the parson business—which naturally I shall almost immediately—I must get something to do. A comfortable sinecure with a large salary attached ought to be easily picked up."

His depression did not last long. He was cheerful at breakfast, lively at lunch, hilarious at dinner. He dressed with care in the best evening clericals of the Reverend Aloysius, and smiled at himself approvingly in the muslin-draped toilet glass of the Rector's dressing-room.

"Parsons don't usually wear button holes," he said, as Hannah blushing pinned a tuberose in the correct spot, "but on this occasion we'll break the rule." Then he drew a pair of Aloysius's goloshes over his smart buckled pumps, and hurried down the road to the village.

Mangold Wurzelfield was in a state of great excitement. Smart carriages deposited their county loads at

the doors of the brilliantly lighted Masonic Hall, and shabby flies disgorged their humbler burdens. The ball-room was decorated with flags, flowers and electric lights, the Yeomanry Band united with the Volunteers in Terpsichorean melody. The opening quadrilles were over. Couples of all sorts and sizes spun over the well-waxed floor in the opening valse. And there was Geraldine! Geraldine in full ball-costume and wearing her mother's diamonds, entering on the arm of her uncle, Captain Halkett. And there, too, in the middle of a knot of county dowagers stood Mrs. Mantowler, looking handsomer than Alaric had ever seen her—and more determined.

"Good gracious, Cottle!" said a voice behind Alaric, as Mr. Peter Turbeyson, in an old-fashioned evening suit, rushed up and buttonholed the young man: "You here? And—mercy on us!—you can't possibly intend to dance?"

"Certainly I do!" said Alaric. He went up to Geraldine, who received him with a radiant smile. "Our valse, I think!" he said, passed his arm about his bride's waist and plunged into the midst of the revolving mob of couples.

"Darling," gasped Geraldine, "do you think you——" but her breath failed her as she was swept upon the strong arm of a skilful dancer into the giddy maze. People stood aside to watch the handsome couple, a buzz

"It's sacrilege! rank sacrilege!" cried Mr. Peter Turbeyson. "He ought to be stopped! . . . it's enough to give a Parish Councillor and Vestryman the apoplexy to of comments arose, both admiring and deprecating. . . . see such goings on!"

He reeled back giddily, and trod heavily upon the toe of somebody who uttered a sharp exclamation in a familiar voice.

"Cottle!" he gasped, recognising the owner.

The Reverend Aloysius, pale, unshaven and dusty from travel, clutched Mr. Peter Turbeyson by the arm.

"Where is he?" he cried hoarsely. "Show him to me! They told me at the Rectory he was here! Point him out! *Ah!* there he is!"

The trembling finger of the agitated young clergyman indicated the whirling figures of Alaric and Geraldine. Then a fierce denunciatory cry broke forth. The dancers stopped . . . the band did the same. A circle of eager faces hemmed in a group of three—Alaric, composed and easy, Geraldine pale and panting, clinging to his arm, and the almost awe-inspiring figure of Mrs. Mantowler.

"Behold!" she cried, or something to that effect, "this creature—this dancing dervish of a clergyman, who flourishes his heels in the face of Decency and Propriety and thinks that he can continue to do so with impunity. Aye!" she shrieked, her black eyes blazing upon Alaric, "I vowed to unmask you, sir, and I will! Gentlemen and ladies, ten years ago I was left, as you are aware, with this young lady whom you all know"—she pointed to Geraldine—"co-legatee of my husband's large property. One-third went to her—the rest to me. The money was to remain, as long as we continued to fulfil the conditions of the will—absolutely at our own disposal. But if either of us married a clergyman—my poor dear husband hated them—and I have learned to share in his dislike!—that one was to forfeit the bulk of the legacy in favour of the other. If both of us persisted in wedding husbands in the Church—both of us were stripped of our inheritance,—which in that event went to my husband's distant relative, Mr. Peter Turbeyson." She stopped for breath.

"Very well put," said Mr. Peter Turbeyson.

"I will own it, when I first met with Mr. Cottle I was carried off my feet," said Mrs. Mantowler. "I will confess it, I encouraged his advances. And I was privately married to him two months ago at the District Registrar's office without telling him about the terms of my late husband's will."

"No, no!" cried Geraldine passionately. She clutched Alaric by the arm. "Oh! speak!" she cried. "Tell them it is not true!"

"He can't!" said Mrs. Mantowler, with dilated nostrils and blazing eyes. "Ask him something else. Ask him whether we did not quarrel, and whether you were not the cause? Deny that he kissed you in the pulpit—you meant him to do it, you know!—on the Eve of the Harvest Festival. And you, you twirling clerical teetotum!" she cried, with a suddenness that made Alaric jump, "deny that I drove you from my presence with the scorn you merited, and that—when my woman's weakness led me to summon you back again—you brazenly insulted and defied me—bade me go my way and pursued your own career of crime—which has ended, this very morning, in a bigamous marriage contracted with this unhappy girl, before the Registrar's deputy, Mr. Smithers, who, finding your name already recorded—coupled with my own—upon the Marriage Register—communicated very properly with me! And now you are unmasked!" said Mrs. Mantowler, folding her jewelled arms upon her heaving bosom and regarding Alaric sternly: "And I hope you like it!"

"I can't say that I do," said Alaric, supporting the half-swooning Geraldine. "Publicity's beastly, you know, and dirty linen—especially if it's a surplice—oughtn't to be washed in a ball-room." He glanced round the staring circle of faces, and his perturbed eye lightened. He recognised his brother. "Why, Ally, old man, is that you?" he said good-temperedly. "Come in time to tell 'em all about it and save me a lot of trouble?"

"What have you done—profligate?" demanded the dusty young clergyman addressed, pushing his way into the circle. "And you—madam!" he cried, turning on the appalled Lavinia Mantowler. "What do you mean by these accusations?"

"Aloysius," cried Mrs. Mantowler, staring wildly from twin-brother to twin-brother. "Which are you?—oh! am I mad or dreaming?"

"Aloysius!" sobbed Geraldine, clinging to Alaric. "Explain or I shall die!"

"The explanation consists of three words," said Alaric. "We are twins—me and old Ally here, though he has never told you about his little brother. One of us went into the Church—that's him! the other stopped outside—that's me! Like the celebrated Two-Headed Nightingale, a strong attachment has always existed between us,—and a few weeks ago when Aloysius—on the eve of goin' abroad with a clergyman's sore throat—would have been recalled to duty—I—unknown to him—threw myself devotedly into the breach. Let no one chuck bricks at a man who is capable of such a sacrifice. Madam"—he turned to Mrs. Mantowler—"you will now exonerate me from any lack of hospitality in the matter of not unbolting the little side-door. Geraldine, if you can put up with the lifelong devotion of a mere layman, it is yours! Ladies and gentlemen," he addressed the crowd—"in the past six weeks, durin' which I have performed the Rector's duty in this parish, I have got out of christenin' some people—dodged marryin' others and drawn the line at buryin' the rest." There was a guffaw of masculine and feminine laughter. "To-day I have myself been married—you all know my wife—I hope, now that you all know me, you will not decline my further acquaintance."

"Why should we?" said Mrs. Mantowler, beaming as she held her recovered Aloysius fast with one hand and extended the other to Alaric, who squeezed it warmly. "Don't mention the gravel again!" she whispered. "He might think it odd!"

And the band struck up again and the dance went on merrily.

XIV

THE FROZEN TRUTH

AS TOLD IN A PORTION OF A LETTER FROM No. 2035
PRIVATE ALFRED HARRIS, WEST MIDSHIRE REGI-
MENT, THE CAMP, HORNECLIFFE, TO MISS SARAH
BISBEE, 2, LITTLE POTTER'S BUILDINGS, CANAL ROAD,
EAST DITCHAM, S.E.

DEAR SAL,

i Rite from Provishunal Camp Clink pendink the
Dissision of the Court of Inkwiry to Put things Strate
betwixt me and Yu Deer old Gal in Case Yu Hav Bene
upsett bi the Bloomin' Lise in the London Nusepappers
about Mutiny & Riot which Has werked the ole Camp
into a stait of indiggnashun imposable to xaggrate.

That there Took Plais a Bit of a Scrapp Between Ours
& a Party of the Ballyduff Fusiliers from Frisborough
West Camp oo Wishes to Deny? but to balli Well say
that Baynits was imploid in the Komflik & that 2 of the
Guard Neer got Outed in consekens is fair Old Rot and
Nonsens. As to an Orfcer Firin is Rivolver in Self
Difence, That be jiggared for a Tale. Also to stait that
the Ole Aphair ad its oragin in an Unpoplar Order Plais-
ing Our Canteen out of boundse for Other Regiments,
is Wot Mullins Colour Sergeant of my comny calls an
offensive alligator which means a Crimson Cuffer if ever
Their Was Wun. The 5000 Men quartered Hear rep-

presenting Cavalry Artillery & Infantry of the King's Army Feel Akutely, Mullins sais that a Gross Injusstis Has Bin Dun by These Injurius Reportse. Deer Sal i Feel Anxious on mi Own Akount that yu as mi Yung Woman Shold Nott Taik the Neadle on Akounts of Wot i supose yu Ave Bin Told bi now, bi that Slab-Sided slack-jord Civilian T. Jones Which is alwais Hanging abart yure little Plais at Ditcham Tel Him to go & Fry His Face a Helthy Brown and Not For the Futur get Up Any little gamse trying To Part True Liverse (xxxxx!).

The ritse of the Matter is mi Deer that on Satterday Nite Me and my Pal F. Brown attended the Music All at Sandspade & There Chumd up With Two Ballyduffs Named Donergan & Sheehy. Privit Donergans Back Teeth Ware Under Whisky wile His Mate Was Disididly Under the influense of swipse. Me & F. Brown Had a cupple of Potse of $\frac{1}{2}$ & $\frac{1}{2}$ likewise 4 Threes of Scotch, F. Brown Aving Pulled Orf a Bett With a chap of Ours & Being Flush of the Reddy in Consequens.

A Yung Lady in a Red Costum & A Blew Hat with Ostridge Plums Passed the Time of Day With Donergan & Another yung Lady in a Pink Blowse Pulled Up With F. Brown Saying She was a Old Joint of 'is From Whit-chapel Wot e ad Bin & Forgotten For other Faces & it Took Two 2's of Gin to quiet 'er Down. The Turns Had Bigunn and the Audiens was shouting Order most stremenjus Bikause Private Donergan Kep a Putting is Oar in and a jining With the Gent what was Getting a Paterotic Song off of His Chest Bifore the Time came for the Corus. Besides Which Sheehy was Carrying on Like a regler Loomey Bicaus wich The Yung Lady in Red with a Blew Hat wold sit Nex Me which deer Sal you kno was not along of My Passing Her the Come Along Ducky, & when there was a Military Sketch With a Cupple of Blokes in Kharki Service Kit gassing abart the Honour of the British Soldier & a Firing Section Volleyse

of Blank Cartridg out of Condemd Martinis over A Protecting Earthwork of Sackse Stuffed with Straw. She Kep a Squealing and Pinching of Yurs Truly & Then Pritended to Get Faint & Fell Back on Support Me Hapning to Ave my Arm Along the Back of the Pit Bench behind her.

Which Sheehy sees and Gits Puffick Outragious a shoving is Ugly Mug against my Fais & says he: "You bloomin' Shoreditch Swine," he sais, "if yu Hav the Marrow Av a Man in the Backbone Av ye Come Outside wid Me Till I knock yure Teeth Out at the Back av yure Neck," he says "For sejoosin the affections of the Yung Lady I'd clapped me oi on," he says "before ever got the dirty arm of you round the Waste of her," says he.

The Yung Lady in the Blew Hat she told Him He was a Low Vulgar feller and she wold Not Be Seen Dead in the Saim Strete With Him for harf a Bull. Everybuddy in the Audiens was shouting Order bi This Time Til the People on the Stag Had to Talk in Dum Sho & a Big Powerful Bloke in a gilt Edged Cap Came shoving Threwhg & Collared Donergan & Chuckd Him And the People Aplauded like mad & Sheehy joined in.

There was No more Rowse Deer Sal & the Evenin Passed Me & F. Brown Enjoying Ourselves a Fair Old Treat. Last Thing Me & F. Brown had See of Sheehy Was Wen E Run His Ed up agin F. Brown's Fist. F. Brown Aving called im a Sneaking Swine for Letting Donergan Get the Blossoming Chuck Out For the Disturbans E Ad Maid & then Aplauding the Chucker & Sheehy aving Told F. Brown to Come On & Ave it Hout. The Yung Lady in Red with the Blew At Got so Upsett at the site of the Blood (N.B. Sheehy's nose) That Me & F. Brown Took Er And Er Lady Pal in the Pink Blowse into a Public Ouse to Ave a Scotch Cold Which she said she Ad taken for Fainting From Childhood. Later on Me & F. Brown Falls in & Priserving Our Formation by

Elber Touch Marches Back to Camp where 24 of Ourse Ware Pigging it in a Korrugated Iron Hutt Miskalled $\frac{1}{2}$ Com'ny Quarters.

Me & F. Brown Aving Passes we nigotiated the Sentries with Eese, Entered Camp by the Quarter Guard Tent & Riported Ourselves to the Guard, Sergeant Murphy Carfully Searching Us in the Wrong Plaisis to Maik Sure No Liquor Was Being Smugld Into The Lines. As I Slipt a Flat $\frac{1}{2}$ Pint Bottle Up His Cuff and Tipt Im the Wink:

"Wot Mangy Civilian Doggs," sais He "Have Followed You & Your Mate Back to the Lines? Clear off!" Sais He lifting His Big Voice & Shouting "Or I'll come out to you in My Thousandse & Perish Ye off of the Fais of the Erth," & at That Some skulkink Shadders Maid off & "By my thumb!" Sais the Sergeant glimsing under His Big Hand, "they're Sojer men & Not sivilians. For all the Dark it is I caught the glitter of Their Belt-Buckles & Buttons & What Ye have been Doing Me two fine Men?" Sais He "To Dhraw down the Vengeance Av the Ballyduffs Upon your Heads I'll Not be Askin Now. Off to Your Cotse An Be Glad Ye Have Whole Heads to Lay on your Pillows," Sais He "For there is No Neater Skull Crackers than the Ballyduff Fusiliers," He Sais, "in the British Army this Day."

Talkin Not Bein Alowed after Lights Out Me & F. Brown Could Not Exchange Opinions as to oo Ad Fol-lered Us xcept in Wispers & the snoring in the Corrigated Hut was Such we Could not Hear Each other Speak. Barmy Sleep Ad not Long Disended On Our Pilows Bifore A Volley of Stones with Arf Bricks & Empty Beef Tins Comes Through the Open Winders on the Looard Side & Wakes up the Chaps by Rattlin abut Their Eds.

"Wot the Crimson Fushia Bell is That?" sais Corporal Jones waiking up with One of is Eyes in Want of a sling, "an oo are You Outside There?"

"We're the Ballyduffs," says a Fritefully Intoxicated voice which Me & F. Brown Rekognised for Sheehy's "An We're looking for the Dirty Blaggard that Has Spoiled the Good Looks av the Purtiest Young Man that iver Marched In soaped Socks to the chune av 'Draw a Threaded Needle Through An Lave the Worsted In.' Give Him Out to us" sais He "Till we Clane Him off the Fais av the Earth, both him an the dhirty little Beggar He Had wid Him. Hand Thim Out here while I'm spakin, ye potted sardines, or by my song! we'll make Chape Paste av you for the billstickers, so we will. Stand back, boyos, an take the worrd from mæ to burrst in the dure."

Deer Sal the Hut door Was bolted Inside & Stood the First Rush. Nex Minnit it was atop of Me & F. Brown wich slep Nearest to it, the Ballyduffs Pored in over it & the Corrigated Iron Quarters Was As Full of Life & Xitement As a Maggoty Tin of Commissariat Mutton. There Was No Room to Use Belts, Men fought with their Bare Fists & the Ends of Their Noses Touching as they Swore Like Tom Catse In a Patent Covered Dustbin.

The Ballyduffs Which Could not squeeze Inside the Hutt were Foaming Maniaxe Bicause They ad broke out of Camp & Got Inside the West Midshire Lines to kill 2 of Ours (meening F. Brown & Me) & Not To Be Able to Do it First Go Orf Was A Disgrais That Nawed Them to the Marrer. They Was cumming In By the Roof When Sum of Our Chapse Fired their Rifles in that Direkshn. (N.B. Our Men Ave all Swore on Being Interrigated by the Court of Inquiry that they used Blank Cartridge but ow Pick & Chuse in such a skirm-maje Deer Sal it is Not Possable, besides which Wun of the Assaleants ad the Rim of is Yeer chipt & Another ad a Bullet Thro is Cap. As For the Rest of us the Caswaltys are cheafly Swelld Noses & Black Eyes Not to Menshun Sum Cutse from Treading on Broken Glass

with Bare Feet.) We Ad just Got Baynits Fixed When the Guard come a Running Up Follered by the Camp Polise with the Waterin Cart & Hand Pump, For Sum Bally Loonatic ad cried Fire!

"Buzz an sting, ye crimson Nest av Hornits," yells Sergeant Murphy which I Heered Him Plane. "We'll Sluice yees out av that" sais He, "in the Shake av a Lambs Tail. Turn the hose through the dure, Corp'd Scanlan, an bid the boys pump wid a will. Disinfect the blaggards to their dirty souls," he sais, "lay the divil in them as well as the dust," sais E, "wid Condy and pond-wather." Deer Sal it wil be Best to draw a Vale over the seen which follered. Enuff to sett Down Ere that the Brigade Major Turned up shortly After the Arrival of the Guard & the Fire Brigade, that the Gilty as wel as the Innacent was Marched Orf to Clink & that the Remainder of the Nite passed Peecefully.

It wil be Planely Understood by You deer Sal from this Sworn Staitment of fax that the maylay i discribe does not Warrant the descriphshun of a Ryot or of Mutiny, so you can tel A. Jones nex time E reads the Paperse to Yu to Fish & Find out For Sumthing Else to Bring Up against Absant Frendse. As to Being Drunk & Disorderly tell Im to Look at 'Ome nex Time E is Not Able to Bribe the Copper Not to Pick Im For a Riper. As to Wantonly-Asaulting a Private of another Regiment Outside a Place of Entertainment I nevr; which Sheehy up an run is Ead against F. Brown's Fist a Purpose; as for Risisting the Regamental Police in the Xacution of their Duty, they was 3 to 1 an ow could I? As to Aving Walked Orf with another Cove's Young Woman she done 'er best to Get Round Yurse Truly But I was not Taking Any & So I Let Er Know.

Hoping this Finds you as if Leevs Me & with Love & (xxxxxxx) for Yourself I remane

My Deer Sal Afexnat yourse

T. ATKINS.

XV

THE CHECKMATING OF MR. BROWN

THE people who occupy the flat immediately beneath ours are great diners-out; and as their dog is of a sociable disposition and entertains an objection to the society of the charwoman, he commonly burrows under the doormat and howls until the return of his proprietors. But the howls now heard by myself and my wife were distinctly human, and proceeded from our culinary department at the passage end. Something must have happened to Loosha! We sprang from the dinner-table, and made one bound to the kitchen door. With instinctive delicacy we listened a moment before bursting in. The outcries never ceased, though at times they sounded strangely muffled. Had a burglar dropped in for a late afternoon visit? Was he garrotting the too faithful creature who had refused to reveal the whereabouts of the plate-basket? I grasped the soup-ladle—which I had unconsciously retained—with nervous determination. We rushed in quietly. There was no burglar. Only Loosha behind the scullery-door, with her head wrapped up in the jack-towel, was giving vent to bursts of emotion which might well have aroused the envy of the poodle downstairs. With compassion, slightly tempered with severity, we questioned the girl. She took some time to coax out of the chrysalis or pupa condition; but finally emerged from the folds of the jack-towel and explained. Mother—who should have known better, having but a brief

twelvemonth since interred her Second—was now receiving the addresses of a potential Third, himself a widower with nine encumbrances. In justice to the aspirant we may mention that he was fairly well to do, being a retired joiner by the name of Mr. Brown. In Loosha's bitterest moments she deprived him of the prefix, calling him simply, and for short, "That there Brown."

The fell news had only been brought by Loosha's little step-sister Emmeline, though Loosha had had a premonitory warning in the way of creeps down her back whenever she had encountered the designing Mr. Brown for some time past. It had been a-dorning in her mind, she said, by degrees as there was something up; and this very afternoon he had upped and spoke, most barefaced, on the identical doorstep. Says he, "Mrs. Hemmans, I will not deceive you, that it was just through you dropping in in a friendly way to 'elp at the laying out of Her as is gone (and Her only buried eleven months) that my attention was, in a manner of speaking, drawed to you; and in a homely way, putting the thing plainly for your thinking over quiet, by yourself, I will say, you have three and me similarly nine; and both unincumbijed, why not make one extra large table out of your medium and my full-sized?" Which table, Loosha parenthetically observed, would ultimately prove her death-bed.

We tried to soothe the aggrieved handmaid by every means in our power. Being within three days of Christmas Day, and having purposed to entertain the representative members of our respective families—between whom all the year round great enmity exists—at a social dinner, the prospect before us was overshadowed by Loosha's grief. If matters came to a crisis she would, as like as not, take to her bed and remain there for two days. At the end of her period of sackcloth and ashes she would, we knew by previous experience, reappear as fresh as paint and quite reconciled to the dispositions of

Fate. But, in the meanwhile, what would become of us? I tried to argue. I reminded Loosha that her mother was still young, active and industrious; and that one could not, while deploring the act of Mr. Brown, revile him for his choice of a successor to the departed; that that successor might be called, even now, a pretty woman, and that men would be men, no matter how foolish it was. I would have continued in this strain, but that Loosha became hysterical.

"She ain't young," she screamed. "With me twenty-three, how could she? And she ain't pretty, or if she is, she ought to be ashamed of herself! And both my father and Emmeline and Elfred's father would say so if they was here! And if she does it—which at her time of life is a disgrace—I shall drown myself over the Albit Bridge, in the Serpentine!" The Serpentine is not far from our Brompton door, and Loosha is a very determined girl. I was conscious of a momentary dismay. But I remembered just in time that the Serpentine had been announced as frozen over in the evening papers. I mentioned this.

"Then I'll marry the Railway Guard," sobbed Loosha. Then she went into hysterics and drummed the floor with her heels and the back of a Windsor chair with her head, in quite an alarming manner; and I was ordered out of the kitchen that she might be unfastened and the inevitable remedies applied. It took a whole gill of Tarragon vinegar and the best part of the tail feathers of our Christmas turkey to bring her to anything like composure.

That was three days before Christmas. We have got over the dinner and the meeting of the clans without any casualties other than those we were bound to expect. And Loosha is preternaturally bright, sharp, tight, and brisk. As she goes about her work she sings. "Come buy my Coloured Errin" is a favourite vocal exercise with her. But it has been superseded by "Take Back the Art." And from the piquantly expressive meaning Loosha

infuses into the opening lines it is plain that she applies them to Mr. Brown, whose addresses have been discouraged, and whose matrimonial plans have been circumvented, thanks to the prompt action taken by Loosha in the matter. It may be mentioned that our handmaid's baptismal appellation was originally derived from a popular Opera, called "Loosha of Lam Her More," witnessed by mother at an important crisis. Mother is quite a cultured person, having chared for several authors, one of whom was a poetical genius attached to a well-known firm of soap-makers. The way that man would carry on when the rhymes wouldn't come, and the extent to which he used to wipe his pens in his hair, must, we are given to understand, have been seen to be believed.

Loosha's mother, like many small, meek-looking people, possesses a considerable amount of determination. If she really entertained a weakness for Mr. Brown, that weakness was not to be put down with the strong arm. Loosha realised that, she tells us, as she stood on the kitchen-floor and met those black beady eyes, so like her own. True, she opened no parallels, but dashed upon her subject in a way peculiarly distinctive. Emmeline and Elfred, seated on two chairs against the wall, paused in their consumption of bread-and-treacle on hearing themselves alluded to as poor lambs, and joined their lamentations to sister Loosha's. The Serpentine and the Railway Guard came to the fore, with certain other ultimate possibilities of an equally harrowing nature. The tumult raged high, though Mrs. Hemmans preserved a calm, even stony, demeanour. And in the middle of it all That There Brown knocked at the door.

No quick-change artist ever effected a more wondrous transformation than did Loosha in that minute. Mrs. Hemmans had glided away to put her cap straight and smooth her sleek parting. In the interval between her disappearance and her return, Loosha and Mr. Brown

had become quite friendly. Brown's manner was quite fatherly, and his features shone with smiles and gin-and-water. He had been screwing up his courage with that fortifying beverage. Loosha, as she sent the astonished Emmeline out for a quartern of the best and provided the visitor with a reliable chair, made up her mind that the doom of That There Brown, matrimonially speaking, was sealed. Mother, without knowing why, felt uncomfortable when the widowed joiner proposed taking the entire family (it was Loosha's day out) to the World's Fair and Loosha warmly responded to the overture. They took Emmeline and Elfred and the Islington 'bus, and That There Brown and Loosha occupied a garden-chair seat together outside, mother and the children being stowed in the interior of the vehicle. Brown was fatherly when they started: Portland Road found him affectionate. By the time they were launched amidst the giddy delights of the Fair he was beginning to think—— Deluded wretch! What matters it what he thought? It was deliberately done of Loosha, the betraying of That There Brown. He wandered with the mother and daughter, each on an arm, through a fairyland of mingled fog and gaslight. They visited the birds, the beasts, and reptiles; and Loosha appealed to him for information as to their names, species, and general habitat, and greeted every remark of his with admiring "Lors!" She never seemed to notice when he mixed up the Bactrian camel with the water buffal. She went upon the circular switchback with him—Mother being too timid to venture—and became nervous in the middle of the airy journey, clinging to the arm of the ravished widower with feminine squeaks of terror. How enthralled she was by his performance on the try-your-strength machine, though the marker on the dial indicated nothing much in the way of a record! The more fascinating Loosha became, the warmer and more perspiring became That There Brown. He nudged

her frequently. All the sensation of his corporeal frame seemed to have taken its abode in the elbow to which she hung. The widow was a dead weight on the other. He and Loosha got lost for a moment in the Channel Tunnel.

Was it, then, that the miserable man uttered the words which sealed his fate? It may have been. All we know for certain is that those words once uttered, Loosha's manner became distant and offhand. There were moments when she was even vinegarish. That There Brown put it down to maiden coyness, and renewed the siege with redoubled rashness. It was when the Flying Demons were about to take their marvellous leap through space, and the popular attention was uniformly diverted to the ceiling, that Mrs. Hemmans—who was not without a consciousness as that for a suitor trembling on the brink of acceptance, Mr. Brown's conduct was, to say the least of it, inadequate—felt a tug at her shawl. It came from the infant Emmeline, whose watchful eye, unchildlike in its keen appreciation of the situation, had detected the joiner's arm in the act of enclosing the figure of Loosha under the shadow of her bead-fringed mantle. After that the widow was taken faintish, and had to be revived with peppermint drops ere the company returned to Brompton. Mr. Brown was not invited in to tea, though he lingered long upon the doorstep. And when he had gone Loosha uncorked the vials of her contempt, and told her parent that she had been nursing a addick in her bosom; but thank Providence, it was unmasked at last!

Next morning a procession of four started for the cemetery. Emmeline and Elfred walked in front, hand in hand and bearing votive garlands. In the presence of the headstone on which the virtues of her Second were recorded, Mrs. Hemmans renewed her vows of faithful widowhood. On the way back the party encountered That There Brown.

"Mother just 'ung her 'ed," said Loosha afterwards, "and walked by him without taking no more notice than if he was dirt. But he spreads 'isself out over the path, and sezee, 'Don't you reckonise your friends, Mrs. Hemmans, mum, at this time o' day, after all as has been said between us?' And then I pushes in, an' he looks up and met my eye. I give 'im a cold stare, and you might see 'im shrink, as if 'e knowed what was comin'. 'Begging your pardon,' I says, 'but did you mean me or my mother?' 'Your mother,' says That There Brown, 'as I think and 'ope will make a good wife to me and mother to my nine children.' 'Which you was of a different opinion yesterday,' I sharps back on 'im, 'when you ast me to marry you at the World's Fair. Per'aps you'd like to 'ave us both, as the Salt Lake Morgans ain't too particular in that way, and you may belong to the English branch of the dinomagation.' 'You've been and raised a nornick's nesk about my yeers, you cat!' says That There Brown, with a scowl. 'Maria,' and he looked imploring like at mother, 'the 'uman 'art is impulsuuous, special when led away by gin-and-water. Overlook the accidence and you won't have no reason to complain.' 'I could never 'ave no reliance on you, Mr. Brown,' says mother, with her eyes cast down, and speakin' as if she'd got pins in 'er mouth, 'after what has took place.' 'So make your mind up to it,' I says, 'as neither me nor my mother ain't going to be no wife to you nor your nine children neither.' And he took and hooked it, did That There Brown."

XVI

THE MOTOR 'BUS BEANO

ONE ques'n I'm a-going for to arsk," says Mosey—name of 'im bein' properly Charles, but called Mosey by me an' 'is other pals along of a bend 'e 'ad in the boko what made 'im look more like a reg'lar Petticoat Lane Sheeny than Alf Emanuel, what was 'is bosom friend an' 'ad a uncle a Rabbi what was a Kosher butcher in Shoreditch. "If we are a-going to ride in a bloomin' motor 'bus instead of a double 'orse brake, on the 'casion of our annual beano, wot excuse 'ave we for stoppin' at the public 'ouses along the road as we go, to give the pore 'osses a drink! I'm a Conservative, I am, an' I set my face against new-fangled ways, that's wot I do."

'E shook 'is 'ead as solemn as a undertaker when I said we'd drink for the 'osses an' ourselves too. It wos cheer an' early, not more than seven, but 'is nose was fair afire, an' Alf Emanuel pretended to light a fag at it an' tipped the wink to me. Then the other blokes begins to roll up with their bits o' frock, an' Alf's sister, Leah, came bounce round the corner into the yard an' I clean forgot everything but 'er directly I piped she was there. "Way oh!" she says. "This is what I call a regular day for a beano an' no error. Pity you left your eyes be'ind, Cocky," she says to me, 'cos she sor as wot they was glued to 'er, an' small wonder. Eyes like black billiard balls, she 'ad, an' skin as white as them penny cream cheeses with a rose in the middle of each of 'em, an' enough

black 'air to stuff a bolster, with a wave in it an' natural chasers on each side like what the other gals puts in with 'ot pokers. She 'ad a whoppin' big red 'at with black ostridge feathers an' a blue silk dress with lace on it, an' yellow shoes an' pink silk openwork stockin's I 'ad a glim of when she showed 'er ankles 'oistin' 'er frock out of the mud, an' a gold chain an' ticker an' a dimond brooch she'd borrowed out o' the safe where 'er dad kept the pledges, to give 'em the benefit o' the sunshine an' fresh air, she said.

Twenty-four yobs and their donahs we was o' that party, every bloke payin' for 'isself an' 'is gal. Four married couples lumped in along o' the rest, an' all us men 'ad straw 'ats wiv a special green an' yellow ribbin so's to know each other by in case they got lost. The dollar apiece inclooded grub. We was to 'ave dinner at a place on Kew Green an' meat tea at another place when we come out o' the Gardens. I call it good enough if you don't.

Eight sizes larger than life was 'ow we felt when the motor 'bus w'd 'ired for the day come snortin' an' clatterin' into the yard be'ind the Stratford Theayter, where we was awaitin' as 'appy as orphans expectin' a Christmas tree. The driver, 'oo wouldn't stand bein' called a "shuffer" not at no price, 'ad a gilt band on 'is cap, an' the conductor was a 'andsome fair young man in a gray suit o' second-'anders with a fancy waister an' a clean collar an' a Reckitt's blue scragrag an' a brown bowler like a toff, a' though 'e said at the start as wot 'e was a married man, the gals rokkered it was only done to keep 'em from quarrellin' over 'is large eyes an' lovely complexion an' 'is curly 'air. Perish me pink if I ever see'd anything like 'im outside a waxworks, at the start, but 'e was only fit for the Chamber of 'Orrors by the time we got 'ome. 'Is fatal beauty was wot upset the apple-cart and spoiled the funeral.

I lay there was a squeeze an' a 'arf to git the best places on the Vanguard what we'd 'ired. A Pavilion Theayter crush on Boxin' night was well outside it. "'Old me close, I'm fainting," says Leah, and I didn't want tellin' pre'aps! Likely!

We started with a row like twenty railway trucks full of old iron thrown over on the line, an' it was plain to see as what that "Vanguard" 'ad bin up in orspital for repairs an' come out too soon. She sent out back-smoke what fair choked the kids tryin' to 'ang on be'ind, an' snorted an' grunted as if she felt 'erself above 'er job an' was trying to say so. Every onst in a while some-think in 'er inside would bank off, and the fust three or four times it 'appened it emptied the show an' the married wimmin let the driver 'ave it 'ot for scaring females with 'is machines. But 'e soothed 'em, and so did the pretty conductor, tellin' 'em the engine 'ud go quieter when she warmed to 'er work. Lumme! she got wuss instead of better. Perish me pink if I don't believe she was the fust one ever invented, an' they'd stole 'er out of a museum to take our gang to Kew. But after the fust three stops for a 'arf pint all round, nobody tore their feathers about 'er goings on. She frightened 'osses, an' made coppers jump, an' drawed plenty of chyikin' from the other yobs we come across. We'd got too busy to mind 'er.

Up along Bow Road an' the Mile Road we went to Cheapside, tearin' the bowels out o' the new wood-pavin' whenever we put on the brake, an' singin' all the songs we knowed an' most o' those wot we never 'eard. Every bloke 'ad a pipe or a fag, 'is bonce on the back o' 'is 'ead, 'is arm round the girl he liked best, an' 'is eyes full o' dust an' grit. The 'ole world was out on wheels an' singin' "A great big Girl like me," "She had an eye to business," and "Buzz, buzz, blue blowfly." Down Piccadilly was a jam, spite of its bein' October an' lots

o' the upper ten out of town, but our back-smoke kept making a way. A Lord Mayor' Show crowd would 'ave 'ad to make room for us, or die.

"'Er engines are crooil foul," Mosey kep' on bleatin'. "'Er feed-pipe is rusted through an' 'er oil tank is full o' dead beetles and cetera. She 'asn't a nut that ain't droppin' off or a screw thread that isn't wore, an' as for 'er carburotters—they're fair rotters an' that's the truth."

Leah turned on 'im an' said 'e was a rotter 'isself to spoil the day with 'is grumblin'. After that 'e shut up, an' never opened 'is mouth till we got off at Kew, an' after rushin' a bar an' drinkin' the till full an' the 'arf an' 'arf casks fair dry, we filed into Kew Gardens two by two like the animals out o' Noah's Hark. The sky was as blue as Leah's frock, an' the grass smooth an' green till you fair perished to 'ave a roll on it, with chrysantuerums an' chinarasters an' red-berried srubs growin' everywhere, and a sweet smell o' dead leaves an' clean earth, what give the old Vanguard points for sweetness, you can lay.

"Ain't it lovely, though a little damp, bein' so late in the year," says the married ladies, keepin' tight 'old o' their 'usbands, for Kew is a place to stray an' get lost in an' never find yourself till you want to, don't yer pipe?

"A few roundabouts an' shows 'ud make this a perfect paradise," says Leah, chuckin' a pork-pie paper an' some orange peel into the middle of a flower-bed, "with fire-works when it got dark."

I plucked up me dandy then, and arsked 'er if she'd 'ave me for Adam to her Eve, an' she landed me one on the jaw that spoiled my chewin' for a week, 'cos I tried to get a kiss orf of 'er mouth that was as red as sealin' wax.

"Fair trade is wot I'm after," I says, with the water runnin' out o' my eyes. "Wot I want is to take you for

better or worse," an' perish me pink! if she didn't hitch up 'er lower lip an' say she was surprised at my impudence, an' wanted to know wot encouragement she'd ever give me, what was goin' to stand up under the canopy wiv 'er father's foreman, Barney Solomon, in a fortnight from that day.

After that we did the gardens, pourin' into tropical 'ouses full of horkids, an' temperate 'ouses full o' ferns an' Chrisanthums, an' intemperate 'ouses full o' nothing to speak o', but the 'ole show run orf me like rain down a 'oarding. All I wanted was to git into me own pocket an' 'ide, 'cos I'd bin made such a blushin' fool of, an' then the thought o' the dollar I'd paid for Leah an' the drinks I'd stood 'er got into my blood an' made me barmy. When we come pourin' out o' the Gardens an' raged into the place where we was to 'ave our blow-out, I couldn't do no proper justice to the biled beef with carrots an' dumplin's, nor the raspberry jam roll. My throat pipe seemed too narrer for anythink but beer, and then more beer an' gin, an' stout, an' nips o' Scotch, but beer particularly. I played the goat an' found myself singin' songs. Once they 'ad to 'aul me down from the table, which I'd got on to make a speech. An' twice they took me outside an' sat on me, but I come back fresh an' more fresh. Leah pretended to think I was 'appy, but she knoo better, an' eight or nine other wimmin was as fly as she was. "There's more fish in the sea," they kep' a sayin', an' also as what marriage was a lottery, but Emma Barker, what was a red-'aired cat with green eyes an' one shoulder 'igher than the other, she kep' close beside me an' 'eld my 'and whenever she could. An' she kep' a whisperin' to me as how Leah was a painted bit o' rubbish what I was well out of takin' up wiv, an' as wot Barney Solomon 'ud be sorry for 'isself before 'e'd bin married to 'er for a week, an' she sang "Lay your 'ead on my shoulder, dear, an' sob

your grief away," till I did, an' it was a precious bony one, too. 'Strewth!

Then we went on some motor-car roundabouts wot they 'ad on the green, me an' Emma side by side, an' I come off, an' they 'ad to stop the machinery to get at me, an' I 'ad a bit of a mill with the chap what fetched me out. My lip got split some'ow, an' the bloke what 'ad 'eld my coat made orf wiv it, an' my front teeth being loose I didn't make much play at the cold-meat tea, but Emma stuck to me like wax and put away grub enough for the two. Alf Emanuel came an' arsked me wot I meant by bein' rude to 'is sister Leah, an' when I let 'im know wot I thought of 'er there was another mill, me showin' science an' never gettin' home, sweet home, an' Alf playin' dab, but touchin' the spot till the bell rang every time, though 'e knoo no more about fightin' than a passover kid.

An' it got dark an' the stars shone, an' we piled into the old Vanguard to come 'ome to Stratford by moonlight. The driver was cryin' drunk, an' the waxworks conductor sat inside with one arm round Leah and the other round another gal, an' owned that 'e was a bachelor after all. Emma 'eld my 'and tight, that is, till the engine broke down, an' the driver tried to look inside the petrol tank with a lighted match an' dropped it in. Then we came of of 'er an' out in a 'urry, and there was nothin' to do after that but stand about an' see the bonfire, for she blazed till the telephone wires crossin' 'Ammersmith Broadway began to melt, an' though three fire engines played on 'er at once, they couldn't git the fire under till there wasn't as much left of the pore old Vanguard as 'ud 'ave made a cookin' range or a perambulator. Then come the cream o' the holiday, which was walkin' 'ome to Stratford without a coat in a drizzle o' rain what come on to make things pleasanter, an' Emma 'anging to my arm, as 'eavy as a sack o' coals. "Re-

member, you've arsked me to 'ave you, George, an' I'm goin' to put the banns up," she says when I landed 'er at 'er mother's. It cost me eighteen an' six an' a new 'at to git another gal what works at my shop—Luce Rainey 'er name was—to go round to Emma's mother's an' say as wot I was already promised in marriage to 'er, an' then the donah wanted to stick to me after me payin' 'er to get me out of Emma's clutches.

I've never bin for a beano in a motor 'bus since then. But now I've 'eard as wot Barney 'ud give anything not to be married to Leah, an' as wot Leah 'ud fair kiss the boots of any bloke wot 'ud take Barney in for a swim an' sink 'im, I'me gettin' more reconciled. See?

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